

## ANALYSIS OF THANK YOU M'AM: HALLIDAY'S METAFUNCTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*Three meta-functions of language are identified by M. A. K. Halliday in Systemic Functional Linguistics, i.e. the ideational function, the interpersonal function and the textual function. Each of the three metafunctions is about a different aspect of the world. The ideational metafunction is about the natural world in the broadest sense, including our own consciousness. The interpersonal metafunction is about the social world, especially the relationship between speaker and hearer. The textual metafunction is about the verbal world, especially the flow of information in a text. The short story "Thank You M'am" is stylistically analyzed applying the three Metafunctions of Halliday to find out if this analysis helps in better understanding of the text.*

*Keywords: Metafunctions, ideational function, interpersonal function, textual function*

### INTRODUCTION

In Systemic Functional Linguistics, M.A.K. Halliday identifies three meta-functions of language. The ideational function is the 'content function of language' (Halliday 2007: 183). It is realized in transitivity and serves to represent situations and events in the world and the entities, actions and processes involved. It is in the ideational function that the text-producer embodies in language their experience of the phenomena of the real world (Halliday 1973: 106). The interpersonal function is the 'participatory function of language' (Halliday 2007: 184). It allows for the expression of attitudes and evaluations and is realised by mood and modality. It also allows the expression of a relation set up between the text-producer and the text-consumer (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999: 7). The textual function of language is an enabling one (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999: 7-8). It is in the textual function that ideational and interpersonal meanings are actualized (Halliday 2007: 184). The textual function is realised in information structure and cohesion.

A key concept in Halliday's approach is the "context of situation" which obtains "through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organization of language on the other" (Halliday, 1985:11). Halliday (1994) points out that, in order to make sense of a text, "the natural tendency is to think of a text as a thing—a product" while "see[ing] the text in its aspect as a process" (p.xxii). The nature of text of the systemic genre theorists is lucidly summed up by Kress (1985:18):

Texts arise in specific social situations and they are constructed with specific purposes by one or more speakers or writers. Meanings find their expression in text—though their origins of meanings are outside the text—and are negotiated (about) in texts, in concrete situations of social exchange.

Whereas interaction between text and context is seen in the form of the nexus between language and society (Leckie-Tarry, 1993: 33-34), social contexts comprise two different levels of abstraction, i.e. genre and register, which are respectively described in terms of context of culture and context of situation (Egins, 1994:32), and which "are the technical concepts employed to explain the meaning and function of variation between texts" (Egins and Martin, 1997: 234).

## The Writer & the Summary

Langston Hughes was an American poet, novelist, playwright, short story writer and columnist, most known for his work during the Harlem Renaissance, when Afro-Americans were challenging white paternalism and racism. He was one of the first black writers in the USA to achieve literary recognition. Hughes was unashamedly black at a time when blackness was *démodé*. He stressed the theme of "black is beautiful" as he explored the black human condition in a variety of depths (Patterson 1969). His main concern was the uplift of his people, whose strengths, resiliency, courage, and humor he wanted to record as part of the general American experience. His poetry and fiction portrayed the lives of the working class blacks in America, lives he portrayed as full of struggle, joy, laughter, and music. Permeating his work is pride in the African-American identity and its diverse culture. "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind," Hughes is quoted as saying (Rampersad 1988).

The story under discussion is about an old lady walking alone in the dark, when suddenly a boy tries to snatch her purse. However, during the attempt, he loses his balance and falls down on the pavement, and the lady, who, of course, is annoyed by the boy's behavior, picks him up and gives him a proper lesson. She decides to bring him home to her house so he can wash his face and have a nice meal, before she hands him some money to buy the blue suede shoes he has wanted for such a long time.

## Themes in the Story

The story appears to be written around the 1930's where racism was a huge topic in the southern states. Back in that era many African Americans had problem looking for a job. It was the time when the black had to fight for their freedom.

Another theme that may be inferred from the story is how many children in poor neighborhoods have very little to go home to, that they are neglected and need someone who cares. The story tells us about Roger who looks dirty and frail. We learn that there isn't anyone home that may take care of him. Then there is Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones who takes Roger home and makes sure he is clean, fed and has money to buy the shoes he really wants, but can't afford.

This shows a different side of a poor neighborhood, a strong woman who shows compassion to a person you wouldn't expect her to bother with. Instead of turning him in to the police, she takes him home and gives him some desperately needed care and attention. I believe the story is homage to the strong black women who has the ability to care for anyone and everyone.

Not only does "Thank-you M'am" teach an important life lesson, it reminds us that no one is perfect. We feel that the author is trying to tell us not to sit back and judge our youth by the things they do now. Even Mrs Jones made mistakes in her day and she still sees something in Roger. Maybe she saw a little bit of herself.

*After a while she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."  
"I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son – neither tell God if He didn't already know."*

Both the examples indicate that she might have seen a bit of herself in Roger, might be one of the reasons of her kind behavior towards him.

Hughes' characterization of Mrs. Jones is fully realized and evocative; he provides just enough detail to make her an individual yet at the same time expects us to call upon our own knowledge and experience of women like her. Yet in a sly ironic twist, he turns her from a frightfully aggressive, physically imposing woman to a gentle, saintly, motherly type, through words and actions that are entirely unexpected, in fact in what seems to be direct opposition to what we might expect

The story is told by a third person, a person who describes all the things that are happening, and all the things the persons are saying. No one's thoughts are declared, so this may affect how we perceive the theme of the story, because we have to think with our selves what each of the persons are thinking and feeling.

Langston Hughes uses conflict and imagery to express the theme of giving and understanding by showing compassion. Roger tries to grab the purse from Mrs Jones but remains unsuccessful. She asked him, "*Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?*" "*He replied saying "No'm."* Here is where the author shows and uses conflict.

## THE ANALYSIS

When we look at the story from the point of 'transitivity functions' included in the discourse analysis which tell us about the language and its reflection on processes, participants, circumstantial functions we realize that the main participant is 'Mrs Jones' and most of the processes are acted by her. When we count all the sentences describing her or the ones in which she takes place, we realize her dominancy at once.

Let's now begin the analysis keeping in view the 'Ideational', 'Interpersonal', and 'Textual' functions of language in order to support my point of view

### Ideational Functions

In order to relate the cognitive realities of the text with its language and give the accurate meaning, it is essential to deal with the ideational functions of language of it. By this way, we will have a deep knowledge of how these characters are seen as, what their mental processes are, what about the circumstantial features, and so on.

### Mrs Jones as a Participant

#### *Relational Processes*

In many ways, she is presented as an active and dominant character. The words chosen by the author to describe her are beautiful and exquisite, showing her dominance in the story. There are descriptions for her physical appearance and for her characteristic features and interests.

*"She was a large woman..."*,  
*"She was walking alone..."*,  
*"The large woman simply turned around..."*  
*"...dragging the frightened boy behind her."*  
*"You ought to be my son..."*  
*"Then it will get washed this evening."*  
*"...you are going to remember Mrs Luella Bates Washington Jones."*

The author uses idiomatic expression while describing Mrs Jones' purse. The author has done this on purpose to describe her appearance. In fact, it is to show her dominance.

*"She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails."*

#### *Material Processes*

Mrs Jones is mostly 'the actor' where Roger is 'the goal' or sometimes the beneficiary recipient.

*"I would teach you right from wrong."*

Here 'I', Mrs Jones, takes part as an actor whereas 'you', Roger, is the goal and 'would teach' is the process stated by Mrs Jones.

*"You go to that sink and wash your face."*

This time what she desires to be made by her is something good for Roger, still it is directed by her and shows her power on Roger regarding him a helpless creature that is to be pitied and taken care of.

Though a dominating character, yet her kind personality is also revealed. She uses the word 'son' for Roger, feels about his desires and helps him with the money.

*"May be you ain't been to your supper either."*

*"Well, you didn't have t snatch my pocket book... You could of asked me."*

*"You might run that comb through your hair so you might look presentable."*

Her speech also throws some light on her social class as she speaks Black Vernacular English.

*"You a lie!"* In this example, auxiliary is not used.

*"I would not take you nowhere."* The example show her use of double negative.

*"You could of asked me."* Instead of have, she uses of.

### *Mental Processes*

Looking at how she sees the world around her, we realize that she can mention about what she likes or dislikes and reveals her ideas directly and freely. We have many verbs telling us about her cognition and affection.

*... kicked him right square in his blue jeans sitter.*

*"Ain't you got no body home to tell you to wash your face."*

*"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?"*

*"Least I can do right now is to wash your face."*

*Mrs Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her...*

*She reached down, picked the boy up...*

*Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere.*

*She dragged the boy, ... led the boy*

### **Roger as a Participant**

#### *Relational Processes*

Physical descriptions are used to introduce Roger and these descriptions sometimes tell us about the life style of Roger and mostly show us inferiority and depravity of him when compared with Mrs Jones.

*"..., frail and willow wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans."*

*"Your face is dirty."*

*"I would teach you right from wrong."*

This is a shocking statement, which shows that Roger has no idea about good or bad. The fact becomes evident when we come across the following utterance of Roger in response to a question asked by Mrs Jones:

*"There is no body home at my house."*

#### *Material Processes*

Roger is the 'goal' where Mrs Jones is the actor.

*The woman still held him by the neck.  
She dragged the boy inside.  
She led him down the hall to the front door.  
"So you set down."*

Here he is the beneficiary recipient.

*"Eat some more son."*

Even when Roger speaks, he accepts Mrs Jones' power.

*"You gonna take me to jail."*

Here the actor is again Mrs Jones even the sentence is uttered by Roger, she will act the process. Roger knows this and he is recipient again.

### ***Mental Processes***

Although Roger's most acts are led by Mrs Jones, we have implications about his feelings:

*"I am sorry, lady, I am sorry," whispered the boy.  
Sweat popped out on the boy's his face and he began to struggle.  
After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do dried it again.  
He did not want to be mistrusted now.  
The boy wanted to say something else other than ... but could not do so...*

### **Interpersonal Functions**

Looking at the story from the point of view of language use between the participants, we come across with variability making the text closer to real, authentic usage by means of questions-answers, imperatives, etc.

To begin with turn takings between Mrs Jones and Roger, it is seen that there are lot of questions and answers.

*"Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"  
"Yes'm."  
"If I turn you lose, will you run?"  
"Yes'm."  
"Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"  
"No'm."  
"Are you hungry"  
"No'm."*

This question answer pattern shows that Mrs Jones is the active participant as she asks the questions and Roger answers in a word or so.

It also appears that Mrs Jones asks question at times not to gather information but for some other purpose.

*"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?"*

Here she doesn't want information but she wants to make Roger realize his mistake.

There are a few questions asked by Roger as well.

*“You gonna take me to jail?”*

This question reveals his fear.

*“Do you need somebody to go to the store, may be to get some milk or something?”*

This question is asked at the latter part of the story revealing that the fear has been replaced by something peaceful.

There are imperatives uttered by Mrs Jones which proves her superior role in the story.

*“Let water run until it gets warm.”*

*“Eat some more, son.”*

*“Now, here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes.”*

*“Behave yourself, boy!”*

### **Textual Functions**

Both the narrative statements, directly by the writer and the dialogues between the participants, are involved in the story. Feelings of the characters have been revealed by the author of the text as a narrator whereas the chain of particular events, speech acts are presented via lot of dialogues in the text. Langston Hughes, like an observer, describes the characters, the events and gives us clues about what the characters are thinking to themselves. For example, when Mrs Jones leaves Roger alone and goes into the kitchenette leaving her purse behind, Roger takes care of sitting at a place where she can easily see her. This shows the state of mind of both the characters who are experiencing trust, Roger being the recipient.

### **CONCLUSION**

The analysis has shown that the examination of linguistics features of a text not only helps in understanding the structure of the text but also the deep meanings of it. Such an analysis reveals the hidden-self of the characters bringing out their intentions behind the utterances which may appear difficult to grasp for a second language learner. Further, teachers can use discourse analysis not only as a research method for investigating their own teaching practices but also as a tool for studying interactions among language learners. Learners can benefit from using discourse analysis to explore what language is and how it is used to achieve communicative goals in different contexts. Thus discourse analysis can help to create a second language learning environment that more accurately reflects how language is used and encourages learners toward their goal of proficiency in another language.

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