

An Analysis of *She Walks in Beauty* from the Perspective of System-functional Linguistics

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Abstract

She Walks in Beauty is a famous lyric poem describing Byron's cousin Lady Wilmot Horton's beauty and his admiration for her, touching countless readers throughout history. Therefore, many researchers have made a number of appreciations from different perspectives such as the techniques the poet employed and the image this poem conveyed. This text will analyze the poem from another perspective---- system-functional linguistics----mainly based on its ideational metafunction and interpersonal metafunction to provide more reference and inspiration for translation and poem-writing.

Keywords

She Walks in Beauty; system-functional linguistics; ideational metafunction; interpersonal metafunction.

1. Introduction

George Gordon Byron is a well-known and great romantic poet in England in 19th century. While most of his works are on the subject of rebellious heroes like Don Juan, his poem *She Walks in Beauty* is regarded as the most distinguished lyric as well as his represent of lyric poems.

She Walks in Beauty tells a charming story. In 1814, Byron ran into his young cousin Lady Wilmot Horton at a dance, who was wearing a long black dress because she has been recently widowed. When she came to him, the sparkling sequins on the dress, reflected by the lights, were like stars in the night sky. Her beautiful face, elegant manner, clear eyes, and tranquil smile made the beautiful lady look both graceful and brilliant. The strong impact of this beauty made the poet write the poem *She Walks in Beauty*, which moved thousands of people for so many years.

This poem has been discussed by many scholars from varied aspects and this text will offer a new perspective to analyze it. Based on Halliday's system-functional linguistics, this poem's ideational metafunction and interpersonal metafunction will be discussed so as to give another angle for appreciating and translating the poem as well as writing other poems.

2. An Overview of Others' Appreciation on *She Walks in Beauty*

So far, a number of scholars have published papers of their comments on this poem. These appreciations can be generally divided into several different dimensions: imagery, theme, language and techniques employed like defamiliarization, musicalization and dynamization (Zi Yun-nan, Guo Xiaojuan).

Chen Rong gives a general comment of this poem in her the beauty in Byron's lyrics. Thematically, Byron expressed his pure praise of women's beauty and yearning for love. Then Byron employed specific and general imagery to demonstrate her external beauty and inner

beauty. On the aspect of poetic devices, Byron used metaphor, parallelism, personification and contrast and alliteration to describe this woman. Other devices are also mentioned, like iambic tetrameter, end rhyme and eye-rhyme add the musicality of the poem (Zhang Bingbing). Language is simple but meaningful with free and direct expression and elegant words.

Apart from these appreciations, Guo Xiaojuan, Zi Yun-nan and Gui Zhigang analyze the techniques Byron uses. Guo Xiaojun gives a comprehensive analysis on the dynamic beauty of this poem from the aspect of background, title and content. Through the contrast between the silent clear nature and deep reserved images, the poet makes the abstract "beauty" lively and vivid so as to present to the reader the dynamic features of "beauty", and unfolds a vivid picture of "she" rambles about the "beauty". This is an original and unique perspective of appreciation. Zi Yun-nan and Gui Zhigang emphasized the combination of this poem's defamiliarization and musicalization but they ignore the most important feature of the poem----dynamic beauty, leading to an imperfect impression.

In particular, in their Appreciation of Byron's *She Walks in Beauty*, Dong Lei and Rao Ting pointed "the beauty in harmonious blending of light and shadow", and explained in detail the light and shade in each stanza of Byron's poem. Their analysis is also of highly originality and can be a good reference for later commenters.

The previous work basically made a comprehensive study on Byron's *She Walks in Beauty* from the poem's background, title and content to its imagery, theme and language, from its techniques to some certain unique features. However, the analyses are not perfect and need more supplements. It will never be meaningless and useless to appreciate beauty and this text will appreciate the beauty in *She Walks in Beauty* from another angle.

3. The Analysis of *She Walks in Beauty* from the Perspective of System-functional Linguistics

Systemic functional linguistics can be traced back to Malinowski's thoughts on the relationship between context and language in the 1920s and 1930s. Afterwards, influenced by Malinowski, Firth believed that language research should adopt the functional approach and the main goal of linguistics is to analyze the meaning of "utterance"; then, in the 1960s and 1970s, Halliday regarded language as a social symbol, a resource that people purposely utilize to express their meaning in context. Also, Halliday borrowed Saussure's linguistic view, Malinowski's anthropological achievements, and Wolff's linguistic relativity to construct and perfect this systemic-functional linguistic theory.

Halliday holds that the nature of language determines people's requirements for language, namely, the functions that language must perform. These functions are changeable and own infinite possibilities. However, these specific functions could be summed up into several abstract functions, namely metafunctions, including ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction. This text will focus on analyzing Byron's *She Walks in Beauty* with the approaches of these three functions.

3.1. The Analysis of *She Walks in Beauty*'s Ideational Metafunction

Ideational function is actually composed of experiential metafunction and logical metafunction. The experiential metafunction is language's expression on people's various experience in the real world, reflecting the things happened, the people involved, and the environmental factors like time and places. The logical metafunction is the expression of the logical relationship between two or more units of meaning in the language. In this aspect, only experiential function will be discussed with the focus on transitivity, which is the main manifestation of it. On the basis of transitivity system, there are six processes, including material, mental, verbal, existential, relational, behavioral process.

The poem *She Walks in Beauty* consists of two main processes: material process and mental process. In the first stanza, except that the first clause “*She Walks in Beauty*” is a material process, containing the actor “*she*”, the process of doing—the dynamic verb “*walk*”, and circumstance “*in beauty*”, the next lines all belongs to mental process.

In the second stanza, the poem still highlights the feelings “*she*” conveys to the author, making this stanza a combination of material process and mental process. “*The nameless grace which waves in every raven tress, or softly lightens o’er her face*”, here is a material process with actor “*grace*”, material acting “*wave*” and “*lighten*” and circumstances “*every raven tress*” and “*her face*”.

The last stanza also is a combination of material process and mental process. “*And on that cheek, and o’er that brow, so soft, so calm, yet eloquent, the smiles that win, the tints that glow*”, here “*on that cheek*”, “*o’er that brow*” are circumstances, “*smile*” and “*tints*” are actors and “*win*” and “*glow*” the process of doing.

From the above analysis it could be concluded that Byron mainly depicted the move and appearance of “*she*” and described the feelings when he met her to express his love, admire and compliment.

3.2. The Analysis of *She Walks in Beauty’s* Interpersonal Metafunction

According to Halliday, interpersonal metafunction is that “the speaker uses specific language structures as the means of social communication to involve the speech event: the expressions of his comments, his attitudes, his evaluations, and also the relationship he sets up between himself and the listener, which are decided by different communication roles he adopts, like informing, questioning, persuading”. (Halliday:2015) The two main roles of interpersonal interactions are “giving” and “demanding”. Goods and services, and information are two kinds of things for communication. Then, four linguistic functions are formed, namely, statement, question, offer, and command. These functions are reflected by tone system and modality system. Declarative, exclamative, interrogative, and imperative tones are mainly included in tone system and the modality includes the modal component and the ideological component.

From this perspective, evidently, this lyric poem bears the role of giving information through the approaches of statement (the description of the lady) and offering (poet’s unique feeling) by declarative and exclamative tones (*A heart whose love is innocent!*). It is in this way that a peaceful and mysterious image of a charming and gentle lady emerges in readers’ mind when they read it. Also, through the expressions of Byron’s comments, attitudes and evaluations on this lady, he “informs” us of the external and inner beauty of “*she*” and his highly praise and admiration.

4. Conclusion

Based on above analysis, it can be concluded that this lyric poem *She Walks in Beauty* mainly consists of material process and mental process in terms of its ideational function, and gives readers information about Byron’s impression and compliment of Lady Wilmot Horton through the approaches of statement and offering by declarative and exclamative tones. Such conclusion could serve for more excellent translation versions but needs further and deeper discussion.

References

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