

An Analysis of W. H. Auden's Poetry Based on Register Theory: A Case Study of Thank You, Fog

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Abstract

This paper applies the register theory from Systemic Functional Linguistics to analyze the poem Thank You, Fog from W.H. Auden's poetry collection of the same name, examining the poem from the perspectives of field of discourse, tenor of discourse and mode of discourse. A conclusion can be achieved that these three aspects are primarily reflected in the poem's lexical choices, syntactic structures and rhetorical devices. Furthermore, it reveals the aesthetic value and theme of the poem, thereby demonstrating the applicability of register theory in analyzing this poem.

Keywords

Register Theory, Field of Discourse, Tenor of Discourse, Mode of Discourse, Poetry.

1. Introduction

Poetry is a type of literary genre. Compared to other literary genres, poetry is characterized by its concise language, rhythmic and metrical richness, diverse forms, and reliance on various rhetorical devices to express the poet's intense emotions. These features of poetry appropriately reflect the field of discourse, tenor of discourse and mode of discourse within register theory.

This paper chooses W.H. Auden's poetry because he was a famous British-American poet of the twentieth century, regarded as the most important British poet after T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. He was known for his profound social insights and exquisite poetic skills, with works covering a wide range of themes and styles, from political to religious, from lyrical to narrative. His major poetic works include *The Shield of Achilles* and *Homage to Clio*, among others.

The selected poem *Thank You, Fog* is from Auden's poetry collection of the same name. This poem describes the poet's peaceful and enjoyable time spent with friends in a country house during the Christmas season. However, the arrival of fog forces them to stay indoors, which deepens their friendships and enhances their social interactions. The poet's gratitude towards the fog reflects the fast pace of modern life and its impact on people's lives. The fog's appearance forces people to slow down and provides a temporary escape from the reality.

This paper will apply the register theory proposed by M.A.K. Halliday within Systemic Functional Linguistics to analyze the field of discourse, tenor of discourse and mode of discourse in the poem *Thank You, Fog*, thereby exploring its aesthetic value, theme, and demonstrating the successful application of register theory in the analysis of poetry.

2. Register Theory

Register theory, proposed by the renowned linguist M.A.K. Halliday, is an important component of his Systemic Functional Linguistics. The concept of register is based on the context, which refers to the situational context [1]. This type of context has a direct interrelationship with the environment where the language activity takes place. Register is a functional variant of language; the way people speak varies depending on the context, and thus language transforms in response to changes in the situational context [2]. There are many factors that influence the

composition of the situational context, but they are primarily divided into three aspects: the field of discourse, the tenor of discourse, and the mode of discourse [3].

The field of discourse refers to the setting in which the language act occurs, as well as factors such as the topic of conversation. For example, if a conversation takes place in the living room where a wife asks her husband whether he has done housework today, then this conversational act occurs in the living room at home, and the topic is about doing housework.

The tenor of discourse is divided into two aspects: one is the social relationship between the interlocutors, known as the personal tone; the other is the purpose of the conversation, known as the functional tone. For instance, when strangers ask each other for directions on the street, their personal tone should be polite and maintain a certain distance, and the functional tone is to figure out how to get to a certain destination.

The mode of discourse refers to the medium through which the conversational activity is carried out. The medium here can be written forms, such as letters and poetry; it can also be oral forms, such as dialogues; or it can be a combination of written and oral forms, such as writing a speech with the intention to speak it.

3. Application of Register Theory in Poem Analysis

The following analysis of the poem will be conducted from three aspects: the field of discourse, the tenor of discourse, and the mode of discourse.

3.1. Analysis from the Field of Discourse

The field of discourse refers to the setting in which the language act occurs, as well as factors such as the topic of conversation. Halliday believes that the field of discourse largely determines the selection and use of vocabulary [4]. The aesthetic value in this poem is reflected in its choice of archaic and colloquial words. The specific word choices are shown in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Word Choice

Styles of words	Examples
Archaic words	festination, volants, cosmos, manor-house, merle, mavis, refected
Colloquial words	p' s and q' s

Firstly, it is about the archaic style of word choice. Words such as “festination,” “volants,” “cosmos,” and “manor-house” in the first stanza of the poem exemplify this archaic style. The poet considers fog as an enemy to the hurried world (festination), slowing down the fast-paced modern world and thus being cursed by things that fly in the sky (volants), such as airplanes and other modes of transportation. The words “festination” and “volants” in this sentence are respectively derived from Latin and Old French. The fog lasted the entire Christmas week, trapping the poet’s entire cosmos and his friends in a country manor-house. The words “cosmos” and “manor-house” here respectively come from Old French and Latin. In the second stanza of the poem, the outdoor scene is in silence, and even birds like the blackbird (merle) and thrush (mavis) throughout the year no longer interrupt each other in the foggy environment. The words “merle” and “mavis” both originate from Latin. These words are known as archaic or obsolete terms[5], and they can all be replaced by modern English vocabulary. For example, “cosmos” can be replaced by “universe” and “mavis” can be replaced by “thrush”. As a modern poem, the poet should not use these archaic terms. However, these archaic words possess a classical beauty and solemnity that meet the poets’ pursuit of novelty without making the poem too straightforward. At the same time, these archaic words establish a dialogue between the poet and the past, subtly suggesting the values and lifestyles of the past. This contrast not only reflects the poet’s nostalgia for the past but also expresses his reflection on modern life.

Secondly, it is about the colloquial style of word choice. In the third stanza, the poet and his friends chat, drink, play games, and lament that good times are fleeting. After the Christmas holiday, everyone will return to a world that requires more attention to manners and behavioral norms (p's and q's). Here, "p's" and "q's" refer to "please" and "excuse", and they are common idioms in English. The poet uses these colloquial words because "p's" and "q's" are part of the conversation between the poet and his friends, and colloquial expressions manifest a sense of intimacy and authenticity. The use of these words increases the efficiency of the poetic expression, better controlling the length and rhythm of the lines, reflecting the poet's pursuit of concise and compact language in poetry, and subtly hinting to the reader that they are in a fast-paced modern society.

The above-mentioned phenomena of word choice are referred to "register mixing" [6]. As a formal genre, poetry should be more formal in its diction. This modern poem should not contain overly formal archaic terms nor overly colloquial terms. However, Auden's word choices in this poem break the conventions about poetry. The archaic style and colloquialism are perfectly combined in this poem, demonstrating the poet's excellent command of poetic language skills.

3.2. Analysis from the Tenor of Discourse

Tenor of discourse is divided into two aspects: one is the social relationship between the interlocutors, which is the personal tone; the other is the purpose of the conversation, which is the functional tone. It is evident that the functional tone of this poem is to express the poet's gratitude for the appearance of the fog and the company of his friends. Therefore, the following discussion will focus on the personal tone. It is believed that the personal tone constrains the formality of language [7]. The closer the relationship between the interlocutors, the less formal the language becomes. Tenor of discourse is reflected in vocative and personal pronouns [8], and it also shows the aesthetic value of the poem.

Throughout the poem, the poet addresses the fog with the second person "you" and its variant "your," which appear nine times, all referring to the fog and things related to it. For example, in the first stanza, the poet uses the second person "you" to address the fog and refers to the English fog as the "unsullied sister" of New York smog, allowing readers to feel the intimate relationship between the poet and the fog, as if the fog is a friend or companion with whom one can communicate. In the last sentence of the first stanza, the poet enjoys a pleasant time with three friends in a country house. The poet addresses his friends by their first names (Jimmy, Tania, and Sonia), rather than adding "Mr." or "Ms." after their surnames. This indicates a close relationship between the poet and his friends. In the last sentence of the poem, the poet uses "thank you" three times to express gratitude to the fog. The use of the second person "you" here narrows the distance between the poet and the fog, making the gratitude seem more sincere and solemn, and allowing readers to deeply feel the poet's appreciation for the tranquility and good times brought by the fog.

3.3. Analysis from the Mode of Discourse

The mode of discourse refers to the medium through which conversational activities are realized. This medium can be written, oral, or a combination of both. It is believed that the mode, due to the differences in media, reflects different lexical choices and syntactic structures [9]. Additionally, rhetorical devices are also a constituent part of mode [10]. The lexical aspects have been discussed in the sections on field of discourse and tenor of discourse, and this chapter will focus on the syntactic structures and rhetorical devices of this poem, hence the aesthetic value of the poem is also reflected in syntax and rhetorical devices. In terms of syntactic structure, as a written genre, the grammatical structure of poetry differs from other written genres.

Firstly, as a modern poem, its form is relatively free. Compared to the strict structure of traditional poetry, such as sonnets, this poem does not have a fixed number of lines or word

limit, the lengths of lines vary, and there are no strict rhythmic requirements. Although there are some rhyming parts at the end of the poem, the poem generally does not follow a fixed rhyme scheme.

Secondly, the poem employs inverted sentences, creating a sense of breaking away from the rhythm of traditional poetry, giving readers a sense of formality and solemnity. In the first stanza, “Grown used to New York weather... I’d quite forgotten... knowledge returns.” The poet returns to his homeland England, comparing the fog of his homeland with the smog of New York and regaining memories of his homeland. The subject of this sentence is “I”, but the poet uses an inverted sentence, disrupting the normal word order, placing the clause at the beginning, mentioning “fog” and “smog’s unsullied Sister” first; then placing the subject “I” in the middle of the sentence, and then returning to the rest of the main clause. Such an inverted sentence not only emphasizes the importance of the fog but also makes the sentence structure more complex, increasing the sense of formality, thus slowing down the pace of the entire stanza and providing a better reading experience for the reader.

Lastly, in terms of rhetorical devices, the poem demonstrates a variety of them, as detailed in the following Table 2.

Table 2: Rhetorical Devices

Figures of Speech	Examples
Personification	you, her unsullied sister
Alliteration	foe to festination
Metaphor	our earth’s a sorry spot
Antithesis	so restful yet so festive
Metonymy	the world of work and money
Repetition	Thank You, Thank You, Thank You, Fog.

The poem begins with the poet referring to the lifeless natural phenomenon of fog as “you,” endowing it with human characteristics and likening it to the “unsullied sister” of smog, revealing the vivid beauty of personification. This highlights the vivid image of the fog and the intimate relationship between the poet and the fog, while also deepening the reader’s understanding of the poem and bringing a lifelike sense of imagery. Next, the poet extensively uses alliteration, such as “foe to festination”, emphasizing the rhythm and “phonetic beauty” of the poem through the arrangement of English words starting with the same consonant sounds, making it pleasant and fluent for readers to recite. Then, to express dissatisfaction and criticism of modern human society, the poet employs metaphor, comparing it to a “sorry spot,” suggesting that the real world is a “place of regret” tainted by human actions. It is the arrival of the fog that allows the poet to temporarily escape this “sorry spot” and enjoy the Christmas holiday with friends without external disturbances.

Subsequently, the poet feels a sense of tranquility (restful) from the arrival of the fog, while also feeling the lively festival atmosphere (festive) due to the company of friends during the Christmas holiday. These two completely contrasting feelings are a skillful presentation of antithesis, creating a strong sense of contrast for the reader. The environment outside the poet’s home becomes silent with the arrival of the fog, as if the whole world has come to a halt. When the scene shifts from outdoors to indoors, the interior is filled with laughter and joy, as the poet and friends play word games, enjoy delicious food and wine, and sit in a circle chatting. Everyone is fully enjoying the beautiful Christmas holiday, temporarily forgetting the constraints of daily life. No matter how wonderful the current time is, it is transient, and everyone will return to the “world of work and money” after the holiday. Here, the poet uses metonymy, substituting the “world of work and money” for the modern secular society. He believes that most people’s daily lives are about work and making money, and the excessive

pursuit of work and money may lead people to neglect other important aspects of life. The friendships, tranquility, and spiritual satisfaction the poet gains by escaping the real world during the Christmas holiday are particularly rare.

Finally, at the end of the poem, the poet uses “Thank you” three times, gradually intensifying in tone and accumulating in emotion. This highlights the transient nature of quiet, beautiful times and pushes the emotional tone of the entire poem to a climax, with the poet’s gratitude towards the fog being the most intense. The poem ends with an emphatic tone, leaving a deep impression of the fog on the reader.

4. Conclusion

By analyzing W.H. Auden’s *Thank You, Fog* through the lens of register theory, a conclusion can be achieved that the aesthetic value of the poem is reflected in the poet’s lexical choices, syntactic structures, and rhetorical devices from field of discourse, tenor of discourse and mode of discourse. Through the poet’s gratitude towards the fog, the poem’s theme has been unveiled. It is a contemplation and critique of fast-paced modern society. Nevertheless, this paper has its limitations. It only applies register theory to the analysis of one poem, which is not sufficient to prove the universal applicability of register theory in the analysis of poetry. To demonstrate its universality, a greater number of poems would need to be analyzed.

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