

An Ecological Discourse Analysis of Faulkner's *The Bear* from the Perspective of Transitivity System

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to review the origin and development of Ecological Discourse Analysis and its relationship with transitive and ergative analysis, and make an ecological interpretation of William Faulkner's *The Bear* according to the "participants" and "circumstances" of clauses under the six "processes" of transitivity system in Systemic-Functional Linguistics. It is found that this novel highlights the ecological philosophy of "Diversity and Harmony, Interaction and Co-existence", and belongs to beneficial ecological discourse. Ecological Discourse Analysis, from the perspective of transitivity system, can enrich the means of discourse analysis, transmits a positive ecological value and orientation, and clean up people's ecological behavior.

Keywords: Ecological Discourse Analysis; Transitivity System; Transitive Analysis; Ergative Analysis; Faulkner's *The Bear*

1. Introduction

"Ecological Discourse Analysis (EDA)", one of the important research paths of eco-linguistics, was first put forward in 2014.^[1] However, the eco-linguistic study in China started relatively late, mainly based on the theory of Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL), focusing on the impact of language on the ecological environment. Guided by the ecological philosophy of "Diversity and Harmony, Interaction and Co-existence", some scholars constructed a detailed and feasible EDA model based on the three meta-functions of SFL.^[2] Later, they proposed that EDA should be an independent research paradigm.^[3] By defining the connotation of his research paradigm, some believes that this model provides an operational framework for the practice of discourse analysis in today's society.^[4]

The Bear is a novella published by William Faulkner in 1941, which is called one of the "Great Forest Trilogy". The book has five chapters, highlighting Faulkner's call for returning to the natural wilderness and the equality of all living beings. Most domestic scholars have studied it from the perspective of literary appreciation,^{[5][6]} and some have explored it from the perspective of ecological ethics,^{[7][8]} but few have analyzed its ecological orientation from the perspective of transitivity. Based on this research gap, the study makes transitive and ergative analysis of the main "processes", "participants" and "circumstances" of the typical clauses in *The Bear* to reveal its ecological attributes.

2. Transitive Analysis and Ergative Analysis of EDA

Ideational function, as one of the three meta-functions of SFL, can be divided into two major functions: Experiential function and Logic function. The former, experiential function, is one of the important theoretical bases of EDA, which refers to the expression of various experiences in the real world (including the inner world), and the latter refers to the function of reflecting the logical semantic relationship between two or more language units. The Empirical function is mainly embodied by the transitivity system of clauses, which characterizes various experiences of people's real or inner world as several "processes", as well as relevant "participants" and "circumstances".^[9] According to different empirical processes and the roles of participants, it was divided into six transitive processes in detail: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral and existential, of which the first three are the main processes and the last three are secondary.^[10]

It was also suggested that there are two semantic modes in the transitivity system of clauses: transitivity analysis and ergative analysis. Although these two models can be used for discourse analysis, the traditional one prefers transitive to ergative analysis.^{[11][12]} Therefore, transitive analysis and ergative analysis of the deep semantics contained in the text can effectively analyze the ecological attributes of

the discourse and reveal the author's ecological awareness and value.^[13]

Therefore, the study first discusses the relationship between these two analysis models and EDA, one of the important approaches to the study of eco-linguistics, and then applies these two analytical models to William Faulkner's *The Bear*.

3. Ecological Discourse Analysis of William Faulkner's *The Bear*

The Bear was divided into five chapters, which mainly described the three important stages of Isaac McCaslin's life, hunting of the old Ben at the age of 16, returning to the forest at the age of 18, and giving up inheriting the manor at the age of 21. The main part of this novel was chapter four, which mainly focused on the whole hunting process, and was collected by William Faulkner into *Big Woods*, a collection of short stories. Therefore, this paper mainly takes Chapter four as an example to analyze its main transitive processes and other processes respectively in transitive and ergative analysis, in order to reveal how it reflects the author's ecological value of "unity of nature and man".

3.1. Transitive Analysis

Transitivity analysis emphasizes the how the "processes" work on the "participants" of the clause. It mainly focuses on whether an action is extended to a certain entity. It construes human experience into six different types of operable "process": material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral and existential process. As a semantic model, Transitivity analysis can reveal the deep meaning of the text and reflect the author's ecological orientation. In this part, the study will make a transitive analysis of the "processes" in the fourth chapter of William Faulkner's *The Bear*.

3.1.1. Material Process

In transitivity analysis, most material processes are intransitive clauses, which means simple position movement, i.e., the process of doing something.^[13] The basic elements of its semantic structure are "Actor", "Process" and "Goal". The Actor is an indispensable component of every material process clause, and the Goal is optional. There are a lot of material process clauses in the fourth chapter of *The Bear*, such as:

- (1) McCaslin had actually seen it...
- (2) McCaslin watched him, still speaking, the voice, the words...
- (3) Even after his twin married...
- (4) The sun was well up now.

When the participant in the material process clause is an agent and the actor is voluntary or autonomous, the clause is more suitable for transitivity analysis. If not, it is more suitable for ergative analysis. In clause (1), "McCaslin" is the agent and the actor "seen" is autonomous, so it is more suitable for transitive analysis. The clause (2) is also suitable for transitive analysis. Although the actor "watched" may be involuntary and the state of "he" has changed, the verb "watched" cannot participate in causative alternation, so this clause is not suitable for ergative analysis.

When the participant is the patient, and the action is involuntary or involuntary, and the predicate expressing the process in the clause has the same transitive usage, this kind of clause is more suitable for ergative analysis, such as clause (3). The clause (4) is a typical middle construction. Although this type of clause also has only one participant and appears in the subject position as the patient, the actor only describes the attribute of the subject-patient, which is more suitable for transitive analysis.

The transitive processes of the clause in the fourth chapter of *The Bear* are mostly material, and often appears as non-ergative clauses. thus, it highlights the dynamic meaning of "do" and conveys a positive ecological value and orientation, which belongs to beneficial ecological discourse.

3.1.2. Other Processes

In addition to the main material process, the fourth chapter of *The Bear* also includes the relational process of expressing orientation and possession, the existential process as well as other processes.

The relational process expresses the relationship between things or with certain attributes or circumstances, so there are usually two participants without causative meaning. For instance, clause (5) is not suitable for ergative analysis. The mental process mainly expresses people's inner world experience

such as affection, cognition and perception, of which the actor is voluntary or autonomous without causative meaning. Therefore, it is not suitable for ergative analysis, just as clause (6):

- (5) He owns the big house.
- (6) I don't like to know that my orders have been disobeyed.
- (7) There was a man and a dog too this time.
- (8) He sneezed.

In the existential process clause, the main semantic characteristics of the existential verb are static, durative and non-autonomous without causative meaning. Thus, the existential process clause (7) is not suitable for ergative analysis. In the typical behavioral process clause (8), the behavior, the agent, directly participates in the process itself as the only participant, and is more suitable for transitive analysis. Verbal process is the process of speaking and exchanging information, of which the actor is autonomous or voluntary without causative meaning. Therefore, it is more suitable for transitive analysis.

In the above examples, the participant in the non-ergative clauses is mostly inanimate things or body parts (but not people), and is mostly served by noun phrases. In the deep semantics, it reflects the harmonious coexistence and interdependent ecological relationship between human and non-human beings and places.

3.2. Ergative Analysis

In order to make up for the lack of transitivity analysis, a simpler and more generalized ergative analysis model was proposed. Each process in this model must have at least one main participant, through which the process can be realized, and this essential participant is called the Medium.^{[10][11][12]} In addition to the medium, there may also be a participant as an external factor, namely the agent. In ergative analysis, process and medium are its core, while the core of transitive analysis is the process itself.^[14] This paper attempts to make an ergative analysis of the processes of the same chapter, and explore what features it presents, and what significance and functions it represents.

3.2.1. Material Process

When the actor and the goal appear at the same time in the material process, and the actor and target are the agent and the patient respectively, ergative analysis can be carried out for clauses that meet the following conditions at the same time. First, there is a causative relationship between the agent actor and the patient goal; Second, the act must be finished; Third, the patient goal directly participates in the process itself, and the state has changed.

In addition, the ergative degree of clauses is limited by the lexicalization degree of the ergative process, thus, the higher the lexicalization degree of the ergative process, the higher the ergative degree, and the more suitable for the ergative analysis. For instance:

- (9) a. the boy opened the door of the little stale room.
- b. the door of the little stale room opened.
- (10) a. Old Ben had killed two of the hounds.
- b. two of the hounds died.
- (11) a. He had removed the corn.
- b. the corn disappeared.
- (12) He stroked the little dog.

With the above three conditions, the ergative degree of the clause (9), (10) and (11) decreases in order. The word "open" in clause (9)a and (9)b construes the same patient medium from two different perspectives, i.e., "the door of the little stale room opened". Although "kill" in clause (10)a also has causative meaning, it is generally used for transitive verbs. In the non-ergative clause (10)b, we can only replace "kill" with another ergative verb "die" which can be connected with it through causative meaning. Compared with "kill," the word "remove" has a lower degree of lexicalization because of the lower ergative degree between "remove" in ergative clause (11)a and "disappear" in non-ergative clause (11)b. However, the word "strike" in clause (12) does not have causative meaning, so this clause is more suitable for transitivity analysis.

In addition, in ergative analysis, if the second participant is removed, the role of the first participant will change when both the agent and the medium appear. While in transitive analysis, the role of the first participant will not change no matter whether the actor, i.e., the second participant appears or not.

3.2.2. Other Processes

In the ergative analysis, the medium is the necessary and core participant, which is equivalent to the actor in the intransitive material process, the target in the transitive process, the sensor in the mental process, and so on. In the following examples of *The Bear*, McCaslin is this core participant: McCaslin turned away...; He drew McCaslin away...; McCaslin looked up at...; McCaslin was frightened...; curiosity overcame McCaslin...

In Chapter four of *The Bear*, there are 79 material process clauses, 34 relational process clauses, 29 existential process clauses and 51 other process clauses, of which 32 clauses only contain medium, but no agent or cause, just as clause (13) and (14):

(13) The bushes twitched again.

(14) McCaslin steadied by the tree...

The first half of the clause only shows how the process happened, but the cause for the process is unknown. Even there is external cause in the clause, it is mostly cause rather than agent, ^[15] such as:

(15) A head and a chest faced him.

(16) Someone had clapped a hand over her mouth.

Most relational processes and behavioral processes in this chapter only indicate the occurrence of events or the existence of states, rather than the active interaction between people or between people and external things. Take the mental process as an example, the sensor is the medium in the ergative model, and cannot actively act on the external objects. There is no effective interaction between people and the outside world.

These processes of chapter four contain different agents, such as physical place agent, social place agent, nonhuman organism agent, group agent and individual agent. These participants have equal roles and status, which transmits positive ecological significance, so they belong to ecological protection discourse.

4. Conclusion

The transitivity analysis showed that Faulkner mainly represented the experiential function as the material process, the relational process and the existence process, in which the material process dominated, highlighting the behavior around the protagonist McCaslin. The ergative analysis showed that these processes mainly represented the bear Old Ben as the “medium” instead of “agent”, emphasizing the special role of non-human elements.

By combining these two analysis models, it can be found that the agents appearing in Faulkner’s *The Bear* are mostly physical place agents as well the alternation of other agents, such as social place agent, nonhuman organism agent, group agent and individual agent, reflecting the harmonious relationship between people and the environment and the place they belong to. Moreover, the transitive processes of clauses in Chapter four are mostly material processes, and often appear as non-ergative clauses. On the one hand, it highlights the dynamic meaning of “doing”, on the other hand, it also reflects the deep meaning implied in ergative relations, and stresses the autonomous spontaneity of various actions. Therefore, *The Bear* conveys a positive ecological value and orientation, and belongs to the beneficial ecological discourse.

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