
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Analysis of the Conceptual Function of *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms*

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| ABSTRACT

Since *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms* has attracted widespread attention, many scholars have formed four interpretations from various perspectives, namely: the poem conveys the love of life and the pursuit of happiness; the poem is a deathbed poem, expressing the poet's despair of earthly life; the poet is a sad and bitter soul in pursuit of happiness; the poem is the poet's choice between "existence or destruction." Poetry is the poet's choice between "existence or destruction," and he finally chooses to give up earthly happiness. Systemic functional grammar was founded by Halliday, who believed that language has three meta-functions: conceptual function, communicative function, and textual function, which are linked to the transitivity system, mood system, and thematic system. Since its inception, Systemic Functional Grammar has been applied to many text analyses, demonstrating its powerful interpretative power. Guided by this theory, the author conducted a conceptual-functional analysis of *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms* and found that there are 25 processes in the poem, including nine material processes, five mental processes, six relational processes, three verbal processes, and two existential processes. The author analyzed the three types of processes that are more typical in this poem and drew the following conclusions: first, happiness is an important theme for the poet; second, the poem is opened by me (the poet) choosing between two kinds of happiness; third, the poet finally chooses non-earthly happiness, i.e., "I only wish to face the sea, with spring blossoms."

| KEYWORDS

Conceptual function; communicative function; textual function; *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms*; systemic functional grammar

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The poem *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms* has attracted widespread attention since it was selected for inclusion in textbooks and has become one of the most widely circulated poems by contemporary poets. Its fresh and beautiful imagery has caused scholars to misinterpret it, mistakenly believing that the poem expressed the poet's pursuit of happiness and love of life. However, the fact that Hai Zi chose to commit suicide by lying on the railroad shortly after writing the poem triggered scholars to think about the real emotion expressed in the poem. A group of scholars, from the perspectives of "明天" and "只愿," believed that the poem was actually a deathbed poem, expressing the poet's despair and bitterness. In addition, two other interpretations of the poem have been formed, which I will not repeat here. So, what kind of emotion is expressed in this poem? After reviewing the research literature on this poem, the author found that few people analyze this poem from the perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar, but Systemic Functional Grammar itself has a strong interpretive power, which can be used to analyze a variety of types of text, so in this paper, the author will take a qualitative approach to analyze the conceptual function of *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms*, in order to be able to decipher the real connotation of the poem.

2. Literature Review

This section will briefly introduce the creation, main ideas, and applications of Systemic Functional Grammar, describe the meaning and content of conceptual functions, and present scholars' studies of *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms* and the four different interpretations that have developed as a result.

2.1 Conceptual functions

Systemic Functional Grammar was developed by Halliday, a sociologically oriented approach to functional linguistics that was one of the most influential linguistic theories of the 20th century.

In *English Transitive and Thematic Annotation*, he states his main view of transitive systems, claiming that "Transitive is the name of a system whose fundamental point is the 'main clause' containing the predicted clauses; transitive systems are concerned with the type of process expressed by the clauses, with the animate or inanimate animate participants, and the various properties and environmental components of the process and participants." (Halliday, 1967: 38) In 1985, the publication of *Introduction to Functional Grammar* signaled that functional grammar had reached a mature stage of development. According to Halliday, conceptual function is divided into two parts: empirical function and logical function. The empirical function refers to the use of language to present people's various experiences in the real world (including the inner world), including the world of the speaker's (author's) own consciousness, thoughts, emotions, etc. The logical function, on the other hand, has to do with our perceptions and the logical relationships we obtain from our experiences.

The system of accessibility has been frequently used to analyze various texts. Halliday's study of William Golding's *The Inheritors* was one of the first studies to analyze a literary text from the perspective of the system of accessibility, and upon studying it, he concluded that human beings can represent a variety of experiences through the use of conceptual functions (Halliday, 1971). It was then applied to textual analysis by Kennedy (1982) and Burton (1982), who found that the system of accessibility helps people to understand language better.

In addition, many linguists and scholars in China have paid attention to functional grammar. In 1989, Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng, and Zhang Delu published *An Overview of Systematic Functional Grammar*, which contributed greatly to the introduction and development of Halliday's linguistic theories in China. In this book, they conducted a comprehensive study of the Chinese language from the point of view of the three metafunctions.

Many scholars conduct research using poems and novels as materials under the guidance of this theory. For example, Huang Guowen (2002) analyzed several translations of Du Mu's *Qingming* by using conceptual-functional theory. Wang Zhenhua (2004) studied the composition of characters in novels from the perspectives of the author, text, and reader. Li Li (2004) investigated the applicability of the transitive theory in practical application. Other scholars, such as Wang Caili (2005); Gong Jing and Fang Yan (2005); Shen Dan (2006); Wei Li (2008); Qin Junhong (2009); Cheng Jing (2009); and Sun Yumei (2010), have also carried out relevant studies, proving the credibility of the analysis, as well as providing theoretical foundations for the present thesis.

2.2 Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms

Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms is a lyric poem written by Hai Zi in 1989, which has been widely popularized because it was selected as a textbook in the Humanistic Education Edition. However, how to interpret this poem has caused many scholars to debate, and four interpretations have finally been formed.

The first interpretation is that the poem expresses Hai Zi's love of life and embodies his joy. The textbook at the time described the poem in this way: "(It) expresses a feeling of freshness and warmth"; "The poet imagines the earthly world, where everything is so fresh and lovely, full of vitality and vigor"; "(We) feel the positive, exuberant emotions in the poem" "Feeding horses, chopping wood, traveling around the world/I have a house facing the sea with flowers blossoming in spring" is the poet's "imaginary thoughts about the earthly life." Miao Liyuan also said that "Facing the Sea, Blooming Flowers in Spring" is a young poet's praise of life, the expression of his inner joy; it is the heartfelt and sincere blessing given by a young poet who loves life to all good people" and "Hai Zi here shows a joyfulness of emotion and broad-mindedness after reflection."

Many scholars are opposed to this interpretation, arguing that the poem was written two months before Hai Zi's suicide by lying on the railroad tracks and that it can be logically deduced that the poem is categorically not warm but a farewell poem before death. "The poem is an elegy for the self-enclosed, a helpless sigh from a person who has lost faith in life, and the pathos of a lonely person wrapped in layers of 'self.' This ideological mood of rejecting 'today' is negative and decadent." (Zhu Weiguo, 2008) "What is revealed in the poem is the last words of a dying man before his departure, a determined soul who finally wants to put down his heaviness and say goodbye to the living in peace. *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms* is precisely the smile of relief as Hai Zi prepares to leave the heaviness and go out to another world." (Chen Xingcai, 2011)

The third reading distinguishes Hai Zi's own thoughts from his poem, arguing that Hai Zi himself is depressed and fails to seek for happiness, while this poem is his yearning for earthly happiness. "The main implication of the poem is the bitter soul's appeal to humanity, i.e., the pursuit of happiness." (Dai Qianlun, 2010) "Hai Zi was a man who pursued earthly happiness without being able to do so, and his poem *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms*, written two months before he committed suicide, is a hymn of life full of expectation and a prayer for earthly happiness." (Liu, 2003)

In 2022, after studying the poem, Ni Wenjian proposed a fourth interpretation related to but different from the first two: the poem is not a declaration of the poet's choice of mundane happiness, nor is it a poem of farewell, but rather a process by which the poet makes a choice between life and death. He argues that "Hai Zi is making a 'to be' or 'not to be' decision in this poem." (Ni Wenjian, 2022) The whole poem, except the last two lines, is the poet's imagination of the happy life he can have after choosing "to be," and the pendulum of the poet's psychology is always in favor of "to be" until the last two lines when the poet is blessing "you," which brings out the real 'me' in his heart, and realizes that he is still not willing to be happy in the earthly world as he described in the preceding lines, and the pendulum swings violently to the side of 'not to be,' which is beyond the poet's own expectation. The pendulum swung unexpectedly in favor of "not to be," and the poet chose to commit suicide on the tracks two months later.

In addition to exploring the interpretation of this poem, the source of the poet's emotions of despair and misanthropy is also a greater concern of scholars. According to Chai Guohua (2005), "the frustration caused by the failure of confrontation with reality, the loneliness caused by the rejection of people, and the confusion caused by the division of the self are the inevitable causes of sadness." Meng Chuan and Su Bin (2007) suggest that the source of this emotion "reflects the pursuit of ideals as well as the sense of loss of reality of the cultural elite in the late 1980s".

Taking an overview of scholars' studies on *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms*, it is easy to find that previous studies have explored the poem from literary perspectives such as stylistics and imagery, and no scholars have yet analyzed the real meaning of the poem from the perspective of materiality. From 2.1 above, it can be seen that materiality has strong interpretive power, so it is feasible to analyze the message of the poem from the perspective of conceptual function, and it helps readers decipher the real meaning of the poem.

3. Methodology

Based on the above discussion, the purpose of this study is to analyze the true meaning of the poem *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms* by using systematic functional grammar.

The research question is: What is the true meaning of *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms*?

To answer the research questions, underpinned by Halliday's framework of SFG, qualitative analysis is adopted in the paper to analyze the material processes, mental processes, and relational processes of poetry from the perspective of conceptual function so as to explore the true connotation of it and what kind of inner world the author conveys from it.

4. Results and Discussion

The empirical function is centered on the verb, and in the empirical function perspective, language not only refers to entities in the world but also explains the interactions or relationships between entities, reflecting our view of the world; in this perspective, the world consists of ongoing events, event properties, and the context in which they occur. The experiential function focuses on the types of processes of language, which are divided into six categories: material, mental, relational, existential, verbal, and behavioral processes. After analyzing, the poem *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms* has a total of 25 processes except the title, among which there are 9 material processes, 5 psychological processes, 6 relational processes, 3 verbal processes, and 2 existential processes, among which the more typical ones are the material, psychological and relational processes, and the author will try to decipher the real meaning of the poem from the study of the three processes.

4.1 Material processes

Material processes are the most prominent type of processes that involve physical actions such as running, throwing, etc. (Thompson, 2014: 95). In material processes, the sender of the action is the Actor, and the receiver is the Goal. There are two bases for categorizing material processes: one is to classify them into creative and transformative material processes based on the presence or absence of a goal, which can be determined by asking the question, "What did XX do?" the other is to classify them into intentional and involuntary processes based on the occurrence of the process, through the question "XX what happened" to determine.

The clauses belonging to material processes in the whole poem are 喂马(feeding the horse),劈柴(chopping wood), 周游世界(traveling around the world), and 花开(blossoming, repeated twice); 从明天起, 和每一个亲人通信(from tomorrow onwards, correspond with every loved one); 陌生人我也为你祝福(strangers I bless you too); 给每一条河每一座山取一个温暖的名字(give a warm name to every river and every mountain); and 在尘世获得幸福(attaining happiness in the earthly world). The analysis of its components is shown in Table 1:

从明天起 在尘世	(我) (我) (我) (我) 花 (你) 我 (我)	喂 劈 周游 和...通信 开 获得 也为...祝福 取一个温暖的名字	马 柴 世界 每一个亲人 幸福 你 给每一条河每一座山
Circumstance	Actor	Process : Material	Goal

Table 1: Analysis of material process components

The most natural tense for material processes is the present tense, but the first four clauses are in the future tense because the poem sets "feeding the horses, chopping wood, traveling around the world," and "communicating with every loved one" in the context of "from tomorrow onward." Therefore, "喂(feeding)", "劈(chopping)", "周游(traveling)", and "通信(communicating)" are in fact "将要喂(will feed)", "将要劈(will chop)", "将要周游(will travel)", and "将要通信(will communicate)". This means that "马(horse)" and "柴(firewood)" are not entities that already exist in reality but exist in the author's imagination. "喂马(Feeding the horse)," "劈柴(chopping wood)," and "和每一个亲人通信(communicating with every relative)" are all things that the poet imagines a "happy man" would do; "the world" is not the real world in which the poet lives, but the ideal world he thinks can make people become "happy people."

According to the second criterion of classification, "花开(blossoming)" is an intentional material process because flowers open spontaneously, not artificially, and in judging it, we can assume that the questions and answers are: What happened to the flowers? Flowers bloom.

The material process reflects people's view of the world. The last complete line of the material process is "May you be happy in this world," where "be happy in this world" is the poet's wish for "you" (the stranger), and this wish is for "earthly happiness" not for anything else in the world. This means, firstly, that the poet believes that there is happiness in the earthly world; secondly, that this happiness is obtainable; thirdly, that the poet's wish is for happiness in the earthly world, not in other "worlds"; and fourthly, that "happiness" is important to the poet.

4.2 Mental processes

Mental processes refer to what happens in the internal world of the mind, and there are many verbs pointing to mental processes, such as thinking, imagining, liking, wanting, seeing, etc.; their most natural tense is the general present tense (Thompson, 2014: 97-98). Mental processes contain at least one human participant, the Senser; what the Senser perceives by going through a mental process is called a Phenomenon; mental processes can also be seen as the mental activity of the Senser triggered by a phenomenon. Generally speaking, mental processes can be judged by whether or not they conform to "what is the reaction of XX." However, certain mental processes do not; Thompson classified them into four categories: perceptive, emotional, cognitive, and desiderative.

There are 5 mental processes in the whole poem: 从明天起, 关心粮食和蔬菜(from tomorrow onwards, care for food and vegetables); 愿你有一个灿烂的前程(may you have a brilliant future); 愿你有情人终成眷属(may you have a lover); 愿你在尘世获得幸福(may you gain happiness in the earthly world); 我只愿面朝大海, 春暖花开(I only wish to face the sea and blossom in the spring). The analysis of its composition is shown in Table 2:

从明天起	(我) (我) (我) (我) 我	关心 愿 愿 愿 只愿	粮食和蔬菜 你有一个灿烂的前程 你有情人终成眷属 你在尘世获得幸福 面朝大海, 春暖花开
Circumstance	Senser	Process: Mental	Phenomenon

Table 2: Mental Process Component Analysis

As mentioned above, the most natural tense for the mental process is the general present tense. However, the first mental process, “从明天起, 关心粮食和蔬菜(From tomorrow, care for food and vegetables)” is in the future tense, and therefore “关心(care)” is “将关心(will care).” From the breakdown of mental processes, “关心(care)” is an emotional, mental process, but the fact that the clause is not in the general present tense shows that the poet does not always and consistently care about food and vegetables but decides to care about them, just as if we liked a toy, we would just say “I like that toy!” instead of “I am going to like that toy from tomorrow.” Thus, the mental process of this line contains a hint of the decision in addition to the concern for this emotion: the poet decides to take “tomorrow” as the boundary to separate his inner emotions, and he has no feeling for food and vegetables before “tomorrow”; but after “tomorrow,” he will care for them.

Thompson points out that a phenomenon, as a participant in a mental process, is not as strictly limited as a participant in a material process but can also be a fact. From this, we can see that “你有一个灿烂的前程(you have a bright future),” “你有情人终成眷属(you have a lover),” “你在尘世获得幸福(you are happy in the earthly world)” is not simply a blessing for a “stranger,” and “facing the sea with spring blossoms” is not just an unfinished wish of the poet’s own heart, but a fact known to the poet.

It is worth noting that when studying the material process of the poem, the author mentions that the importance of “happiness” for the poet can be deduced from the process of “在尘世中获得幸福(attaining happiness in the world),” however, here, we can see that the fact known to Hai Zi is that “you,” not I (the poet), “have attained happiness in the world,” which includes but is not limited to “a brilliant future” and “a lover in love.” It can be inferred that the poet’s psychology in these three lines is not simply wishing the stranger, but rather: I (the poet) know that you (the stranger) have gained the happiness I imagined in the earthly world, and although I have not gained such happiness myself, I hope in my heart that you can gain it. So, does the poet feel despair and loss or even decide to abandon the world? I do not think so because, in the last psychological process, the poet mentioned, “I only wish,” that is, I (the poet) hope that you (the stranger) can obtain the happiness that I have not obtained in the earthly world, but I am not disappointed that I have not obtained such happiness, because I (the poet) have the happiness of “facing the sea with spring blossoms,” which is not a helpless act, but I have imagined the happiness in the earthly world, but I still only hope to have the happiness of “facing the sea with spring blossoms,” and this ultimate hope was confirmed two months later - Hai Zi committed suicide by lying down on the railroad track.

This conclusion coincides with the conclusion of Ni Wenjian’s analysis: “When the ‘you’ of ‘Stranger I also bless you’ appeared, and especially when the words “May you find your soulmate and live happily ever after” were spoken, it touched a hidden pain within Hai Zi - both metaphysical and metaphysical, making him fully aware of what was originally buried in his heart, what he, Hai Zi, could not, and therefore did not, want to be like the multitude of beings. The moment ‘you’ exits, it awakens and calls out that ‘I’ within Haizi... and it is brought more to the fore...” (Ni Wenjian, 2022)

4.3 Relational process

The relational process refers to the process of reflecting the relationship between things, which is divided into identifying and attributive relational processes. The two participants are the Carrier (the entity that “carries” the attribute) and the Attribute. There are six relational processes in the whole poem, which are: 从明天起, 做一个幸福的人(from tomorrow onwards, be a happy person); 我有一所房子(I have a house); 春暖(warm spring, repeated 2 times); 你有一个灿烂的前程(you have a brilliant future); and 有情人终成眷属(lovers are always happy). The analysis of some of the relational process components is shown in Table 3:

从明天起	(我) 有情人	做 终成	一个幸福的人 眷属
Circumstance	Token	Process: rel, ident	Value

Table 3: Partial relational process component analysis

In essence, identification is a matter of linking a specific entity to a more general category. In the first clause, I (the poet) am the concrete entity, and “a happy person” is the more general category; we can say “I (the poet) represent a happy person” but not vice versa: a happy person represents me (poet).” This is the first line of the poem, which is the same as the above analyzed lines, set in the context of “from tomorrow,” and by the same token, we can see that I (the poet) in this line do not belong to such a broad category as “a happy man,” but he decides to do it, to become “a happy man.” This is in line with Ni Wenjian’s view that “the starting point of Haizi’s poem is to be a happy person” (Ni Wenjian, 2022).

Thompson mentions that T-V analysis often leads us to the author’s broader concerns and values. In essence, “values” reveal the author’s (and his/her culture’s) values or types, which are ultimately used by his/her culture to categorize the markers he/she deals with (Thompson, 2014: 102-104). This shows that “a happy man” reveals Hai Zi’s pursuit and aspiration for happiness, which is in line with the conclusion of the author’s analysis in 3.1. At the same time, it also shows that when categorizing “happiness” or not, the poet categorizes himself at that moment as “unhappy” because I (the poet) am going to be “a happy man” only “from tomorrow.” From this, we can infer that the poet is making a decision regarding this line. This is also in line with Thompson’s argument that “in some cases, these are limited by the particular task at hand,” i.e., the poet is tasked with thinking about two kinds of happiness (earthly happiness and “facing the sea with spring blossoms”) and making a choice.

Combining the analysis of 3.1 and 3.2, we can understand that the poem opens with an unhappy me (the poet) deciding to “be a happy man,” and from this, he imagines the happy things that “a happy man” would do: “chopping wood, feeding horses, traveling around the world,” “corresponding with loved ones,” “telling everyone about happiness”; “giving every river and every mountain a warm name” as well and also “to bless strangers.” However, when I (the poet) imagined the happiness that I would have after “being a happy person” and finally made it clear by wishing the stranger (you) happiness in the earthly world, I awoke with a start from my immersion: this is not the happiness that I wish to have, the happiness that I want to have is just “facing the sea with spring blossoms.”

5. Conclusion

In order to answer the question of what the real meaning of Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms is, this paper analyzes the poem from the perspective of conceptual function by using Systemic Functional Grammar. The author finds that there are 25 processes in the poem, among which there are 9 material processes, 5 psychological processes, 6 relational processes, 3 verbal processes, and 2 existential processes. By analyzing the three typical processes of the poem: material process, mental process, and relational process, the author found that: firstly, happiness is an important theme for the poet; secondly, the poem begins with me (the poet) choosing between two kinds of happiness; and thirdly, the poet finally chooses the non-earthly happiness, i.e., “I only wish to face the sea with spring blossoms.”. This conclusion is consistent with Ni Wenjian’s analysis.

Since this study only qualitatively analyzes the poem “Facing the Sea, Blooming Flowers in Spring” and lacks a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis of the poet’s other works of the same period, the interpretation of the poet’s inner world may be biased, and subsequent scholars may conduct a more comprehensive study based on the corpus of Hai Zi’s works of the same period.

Systemic Functional Grammar was born in English-speaking countries, and was first applied to the analysis of English texts, and then after it was introduced into China, many scholars analyzed many types of texts under its guidance. The author takes *Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms* as the material and analyzes the real meanings of this poem with the analysis of its conceptual functions as a starting point, which illustrates the wide adaptability of Systemic Functional Grammar to the analysis of texts. In this paper, Systemic Functional Grammar once again proves its powerful explanatory power, and the author has been impressed by its near-perfect logic several times when applying it to text analysis. The author will not stop learning Systemic Functional Grammar but learn more about it in the future.

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