

## SYNTACTIC FOREGROUNDING IN WORDSWORTH'S "LINES WRITTEN IN EARLY SPRING"

Malihe Sobhani

Isfahan University

### Abstract

The syntactic, semantic, and phonological systems of a language determine the range of structural options from which any language user can choose in order to convey what he wants to say in the most effective way. In this paper, attempt is made to indicate how Wordsworth has highlighted some pieces of information in his poem, "Lines Written in Early Spring" by thematization or foregrounding in syntax. The Hallidayan (1985) approach is used in the thematic analysis of the poem; the three features of texts and of contexts of situation and their bilateral relation are also discussed.

### Introduction

In all types of texts, there is a two-way relationship between texts and contexts of situation and of culture. According to Halliday (1978, pp. 112-7), there are three features which characterize contexts of situation and three functional components which are present in every coherent text. The first feature of the context of situation, field, refers to the type of social action; the second feature, tenor, to the role relationships; and the third feature, mode, to the channel. On the other hand, the first functional component of texts is the ideational component representing the speaker's meaning as an observer. The second one is the interpersonal component characterizing the speaker's meaning potential as an

intruder. And the third one is the textual component which provides texture for the first two components. In all types of texts, there is a tendency for the field to be linguistically encoded in the ideational component; the tenor in the interpersonal component; and the mode in the textual component.

The focus of this paper is the textual component and the way it is utilized in the actualization of ideational meaning in the text. The text chosen is the poem "Lines Written in Early Spring" by the English poet William Wordsworth. The feature chosen in the textual analysis of the poem is thematization or foregrounding which is achieved through syntax in the theme-rheme organization of



the clauses based on the Hallidayan approach (1985, p. 38).

Before analyzing the thematic organization of the poem, the situational and cultural contexts which are the determining factors in the major themes of the poem are discussed in terms of field, tenor, and mode. The field of the poem is nature because it was written in the Romantic period when the landscape was a persistent subject of poetry. With respect to the tenor, the poem is a public text through which the poet addresses his reader raising a problem. Regarding the mode of the poem, it is a written text belonging to a recognized poetic genre in the Romantic period. The poet exploiting different rhetorical devices, mainly thematization, defamiliarizes nature through a refreshed and renovated way of looking upon it and thus achieves the intended effect.

In the thematic analysis of the poem, three themes are unfolded. The first theme is the poet's passionate love of nature; the second one is his sense of unity with nature; and the third one is separation of man from nature. These themes constitute the ideational component of the poem reflecting the poet's experience of the external world and also his internal world.

### **Syntactic Foregrounding in Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring"**

Culture as a social semiotic is a general semiotic system or meaning potential which constitutes a set of sign systems or modes of expression such as painting, sculpture, music, language, etc. Compared with other systems of meaning, language is the most important, the most comprehensive, and the most all-embracing system used to express a large number of realities lying above and beyond it (Halliday and Hasan, 1989, p. 4). These realities are shaped and patterned, first, at higher level semiotics in the form of different universes of discourses such as medical discourse, educational discourse, literary discourse, etc. These higher level semiotic universes are, in turn, layered into lower levels of meaning called genres which are realized in different texts.

For instance, the universe of literature is layered into different genres such as comedy, tragedy, narrative, poetry, etc. These discourses and genres are derived from conventionalized situational and cultural contexts in the social system. As a result, their organizations express the meaning and values of the social institution to which they belong. They should, therefore, be studied in terms of different assumptions and norms of interpretations (Kress, 1985, pp. 18- 20).

This two-way relationship between text and context of situation and of culture is very significant because without the recognition of this bi-directionality it would be difficult to account for the possibility of texts in general and literary texts in particular.

According to Halliday (1978, p. 117), there are three features which characterize contexts of situation and which collectively serve to predict text and its genre. The first feature, field, refers to what is actually taking place or to the type of social action. The second feature, tenor, relates to who is taking part or to the role relationships. The third feature, mode, relates to the part the language is playing including channel (spoken or written).

On the other hand, texts are products of three functional components of the semantic system (Halliday, 1978, p. 112). These modes of meaning are present in every coherent text. The ideational function or component represents the speaker's meaning as an observer. It is the content function of language, expressing the speaker's external world - objects, events, qualities, states - and his internal world or his consciousness including the phenomenon of language itself. The interpersonal component characterizes the speaker's meaning potential as an intruder. This component enables the speaker to intrude himself into the context of the situation, helping him to express his own attitudes and judgments and influence the attitudes and behavior of others. The textual component can be distinguished from the first two in that it is an enabling component which actualizes the ideational and interpersonal components providing the



texture. However, texture should not be regarded as something which is achieved by superimposing an appropriate text form on a preexisting ideational context. The textual component is a component of meaning along with the ideational and interpersonal components which operate simultaneously one after the other.

But how are the semiotic components of the situation - field, tenor, and mode - related to the functional components of the semantics - ideational, interpersonal, and textual components? In all types of texts, there is a tendency for the field of social action to be encoded linguistically in the form of ideational meanings; role relationships, in the form of interpersonal meanings; and the symbolic mode, in the form of textual meanings. In other words, the field determines the selection of interpersonal meanings and the mode the selection of textual meanings (Halliday and Hasan, 1989, p. 25).

The focus of the present paper is the textual component of language in the Hallidayan (1985: 53) approach and the way this component is utilized in the actualization of ideational meanings in the text. The text chosen is a poem written by the English poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850), so it belongs to the poetic genre and the literary discourse. The feature chosen in the textual analysis of the poem is foregrounding or thematization which is achieved through syntax in the theme-rheme organization of the clause (Halliday, 1985, p. 38). Therefore, the focus of the analysis is the themes of the clauses and the selection of the categories (participants, circumstances, or processes) in thematic position which is a clue to the ideational meanings intended by the poet.

#### Lines Written in Early Spring

I heard a thousand blended notes,  
While in a grove I sate reclined,  
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts  
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.  
To her fair works did Nature link

The human soul that through me ran  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,  
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;  
And 'tis my faith that every flower  
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,  
Their thoughts I cannot measure  
But the least motion which they made,  
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan  
To catch the breezy air;  
And I must think, do all I can,  
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,  
If such be Nature's holy plan,  
Have I not reason to lament  
What man has made of man?

Before analyzing the thematic organization of the poem, the situational and cultural contexts which are determining factors in the major themes of the poem will be discussed in terms of the contextual features - field, tenor, mode.

As far as the field of discourse is concerned, it is a nature poem written in the Romantic period. Because nature or the landscape was a persistent subject of poetry in that period, Romantic poetry has become synonymous with "nature poetry". However, it was believed that nature served only as a stimulus to the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking. The important romantic poems are in fact poems of feelingful meditation about an important human problem (Abrams, 1981, pp. 115-116). Furthermore, these poems, usually having a metaphysical concept of nature, attribute human life, passion, and expressiveness to the landscape in reaction against the mechanical world views of the scientific philosophers of the 17th and 18th



centuries. Wordsworth, like many Romantic poets, responded to nature as a living entity which shares the feelings of the observer. Moreover, he also revived the ancient theological concept that God's creation constitutes a symbol system, a physical revelation parallel to the Revelation in the Scriptures (Abrams, 2000, p. 9).

The second feature of the situational context is tenor which is concerned with the role relationships involved. As this is a poem, it is a public text (Halliday and Hasan, 1985, p. 24) which the poet addresses to the reader. The poet is a man endowed with more lively sensibility, enthusiasm, and tenderness. Having greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul, he rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life within him and delights to contemplate similar vitality in the external world (Hodgart and Redpath, 1964, p. 160). In describing poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," Wordsworth identifies the poet as a man speaking to men. The purpose of poetry to Wordsworth is to delight, move, and instructing the reader. Furthermore, it is only by faithfully expressing the intimate experience of an individual - himself - that Wordsworth arrives at a sense of the universal and the ideal (Lawrence, et al, 1992, p. 38).

Thirdly, as far as the mode of discourse is concerned, it is a lyrical poem belonging to a recognized poetic genre in the Romantic period. In this genre, the poet exploiting different rhetorical devices, makes the external world new and defamiliarizes the familiar through a refreshed and renovated way of looking upon it and thus achieves the intended effect. In other words, he throws over common incidents and situations a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things are presented to the mind in an unusual way (Abrams, 1971, pp. 378-9).

According to the Russian formalists, especially Victor Shklovsky, ordinary language tends to diminish our awareness of reality because the thoughts evoked by the words scarcely require reflection (Selden, 1984, p. 41). Shklovsky argues

that we can never retain the freshness of our perceptions of objects; the demands of normal existence require that they must become automatized. Literary language works in the opposite direction: it draws attention to perceptions by making them unfamiliar; in other words, it defamiliarizes them (Selden, et al, 1997, p. 33). Mukarovsky developed the formalist concept of defamiliarization into more systematic foregrounding which he defined as the aesthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components (Selden, et al, 1997, p. 38 ).

Mukarovsky is not the only scholar who defined foregrounding in terms of deviation from linguistic rules. Leech (1969, p. 57) also described foregrounding as the deviation from linguistic or other social accepted norms and maintained that foregrounding devices should be cohesively related to one another to bring about more powerful effect on the text. Chapman (1973, p. 27) and Halliday (1973, p. 112 ) added other aspects to the concept of foregrounding ; Chapman considered it praiseworthy because it heightens awareness and understanding and Halliday described it as prominence that is motivated because it highlights some feature of the language of a text.

Patterns of prominence or foregrounding in a poem are the regularities in the sounds, words, or grammatical structures that stand out in someway contributing to the poet's total meaning (Halliday, 1973, p. 112). What characterizes literary foregrounding as opposed to the random foregrounding in the ordinary language in a social situation is in Mukarovsky's words the consistency and systematic character of foregrounding. The consistency manifests itself in the fact that the reshaping of the foregrounded components within a given work occurs in a stable direction (in Hill, 1969, p. 266). According to Hasan (1985, p. 95), there are two aspects to this consistency: the stability of its semantic direction and the stability of its textual location. By stability of semantic direction, the various foregrounded patterns point toward the same general meaning or theme in the



poem. Stability of textual location means that the foregrounded patterns occur at a textually important point. For example, if four occurrences of a specific foregrounded pattern appear in a poem, there is a strong local expectancy that a fifth will follow. But the probability of finding the same pattern of frequency in ordinary, random foregrounding is very small.

The points discussed above will be illustrated in the analysis of the poem written by Wordsworth. The poem consists of six stanzas and its analysis will be based on syntactic foregrounding or thematization. The linguistic approach mainly applied in this analysis is the functional grammar of Halliday (1985, p. 45).

In the thematic analysis of this poem, three themes will be unfolded. The first theme is the poet's passionate love of nature. Wordsworth was a perfect Enthusiast in his admiration of nature in all her various forms (Williams, 1996: 33). He loved the visible world as God had created it and disliked industrial arts and empirical sciences (Maurice, 1994, p. 59). In his mind's eye, he saw the elegance, dignity, and magnificence of the natural phenomena which escaped the common, superficial observer. The second theme is his sense of unity with nature. The fascinating beauty of the natural scenes permeated his mind and spirit and his whole consciousness, purifying for him the atmosphere of life. Wordsworth believed that humanity is in closest touch with reality, as well as in its healthiest, most tranquil state when it is most intimately blended with the cosmic processes (Abrams, 1960, p. 93). And the third theme is separation of man from nature. There is scarcely one of his poems which does not direct attention to some moral sentiment, or to some general principle, or law of thought (Abrams, 1960, p. 90). These themes which constitute the ideational component of language reflect the poet's particular ways of looking at the world which are in turn influenced by his social environment.

In the first stanza,

I heard a thousand blended notes,  
While in a grove I sate reclined,  
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts,  
Bring sad thoughts to the mind

The first foregrounded element is the circumstantial adjunct, "in a grove" which is a marked theme within the second clause. There is a second foregrounded element "in that sweet mood" which is also a marked theme in the third clause of this stanza. These two thematically marked circumstantial adjuncts show that he loved nature and felt immersed in the pleasures of the natural world. However, in spite of its delighting effect, this natural scene stimulated his thinking at the same time and reminded him of sad thoughts which was the result of a prior process of deep reflection (Abrams, 1981, p. 116).

In the second stanza,

To her fair works did Nature link  
The human soul that through me ran  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man.

The circumstantial adjuncts, "to her fair works" in the first major clause and "through me" in the relative clause have been foregrounded. This thematization shows that Wordsworth felt unified with the great appearances of nature. In fact, Wordsworth's poetic activity was largely conditioned by the tradition of his time. Ever since the Renaissance, the Creation had been considered as the art of God and the sacredness of nature was the main focus of consciousness. Moreover, man, because of his grandeur, dignity, and the holiness of his heart's affections, was increasingly regarded as a creature not only made in, but retaining God's image (Abrams, 1960, p. 93).

Wordsworth's poetry, as an artistic climax and renewal of this tradition, turned to nature and the human soul presenting nature as the symbol of the spiritual life of man (Wimsatt & Brooks, 1970, pp.



359-393). However, this sense of unity with the divine soul in nature led to his great suffering from man's negligence of his dignified, holy status which he showed through the thematic prominence of "much" in the second major clause of the same stanza, "And much it grieved my heart to think what man has made of man."

In the third stanza,

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,  
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths,  
And 'tis my faith that every flower  
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The circumstantial elements, "through primrose tufts" and "in that green bower" have been foregrounded in the first major clause to show the beauty and magnificence of nature. In the second major clause, there is a predicated theme or a cleft sentence "And 'tis my faith that" which contributes to the highlighting of 'faith'. This thematic prominence shows that the poet worshipped nature and perceived an organic interconnectedness in the universe where flowers are part of the organic world sharing the feelings of the observer. Wordsworth's creative power and sensibility had taught him that he was not alone with an inanimate cold world but with an active universe whose joy, beauty, and sublimity were inherent qualities in his own soul as well.

In the fourth stanza,

The birds around me hopped and played,  
Their thoughts I cannot measure  
But the least motion which they made,  
It seemed a thrill of pleasure,

The thematization of "their thoughts" shows that mental activity was not confined to humans nor even to the organic world. In a worldview based on cosmic unity, everything, organic and inorganic, shared in the divine soul which permeated the

whole universe. The second major clause includes the thematic equative, "But the least motion which they made" which in turn reflects the vitality and joy the poet experienced in affinity with nature.

In the fifth stanza,

The budding twigs spread out their fan  
To catch the breezy air;  
And I must think, do all I can,  
That there was pleasure there.

There is no syntactic foregrounding ; however, the personification of, "the budding twigs" highlights the same theme discussed in stanza four. In this stanza, he felt a vitality in nature which he shared and enjoyed because of his unity and consciousness. Sympathizing with the natural objects, he identified himself with them and grasped their dynamic, pulsing, living reality.

Now that most of the poem has been analyzed, we have become sensitive to the relative frequency of the foregrounding of circumstantial elements. The high frequency of this pattern has created a local norm and an expectation in us about the thematic organization of the poem. However, in the last stanza,

If this belief from heaven be sent  
If such be Nature's holy plan,  
Have I not reason to lament  
What man has made of man?

This expectation is defeated by two other ways of prominence - that is, the deliberate, effective use of a rhetorical question and the use of two conditional clauses for emphasis; furthermore the repetition of the clause, "What man has made of man?" once again brings into focus the poet's concern about man's lamentable situation.

By this multilevel foregrounding, the poet packs the themes developed throughout the poem into one stanza - his worshipping nature: nature not only gives him direct access to God but also possesses



the attributes of divinity (Abrams, 2000, p. 10); his sense of unity with nature: nature symbolizes his spiritual life and that higher life in which the spiritual life of man participates (Wimsatt, et al, 1970, p. 393); and his deep regret about separation of man from nature resulting in the disintegration of man's soul. What actually moved Wordsworth was moral repulsion because he felt that scientific mentality had left something out which comprised everything that was important namely moral intuition and life itself (Stumpf, 1989, p. 404).

Wordsworth, who is distressed because of the catastrophic fate of man, intends to draw moral conclusions from his poem. His dualistic vision in the last stanza illustrates God's divine plan which is manifested in the most intimate unity of His divinity and humanity. This unity, according to Wordsworth, has been disintegrated and disrupted into conflicting parts in the scientific world. To recover the lost integrity and unity of his origin, man has to destroy his false, inorganic, materialistic connections and return to total unity with himself, with the external world, and, above all, with the Supreme Being.

## References

- Abrams, M. H. (1960). *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*. New York: oxford university Press Inc.
- Abrams, M. H. (1971). *Natural Supernaturalism*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc.
- Abrams, M. H. (1981). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fourth Edition. Japan: Holt, Rinhart and Winston.
- Abrams, M. H. (2000). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. II. Seventh Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Chapman, R. (1973). *Linguistics and Literature*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1973). *Explorations in the Functions of Language*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. and R. Hasan (1989). *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a social Semiotic Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford university Press.
- Hasan, R. (1985). *Linguistics, Language and Verbal Art*. Oxford: Oxford university press.
- Hill, A. A., ed. (1969). *Linguistics: The Prague School of linguistics*. Forum Lectures, Voice of America. The united states Information Service.
- Hodgart, P. and T. Redpath., eds. (1964). *Romantic Perspectives*. London: George G. Harrap & Co. LTD.
- Ford, B. (1962). *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Blake to Byron*. Vol. V. Great Britain: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Kress, G. (1985). *Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lawrence, K., et al. (1992). *The McGraw - Hill Guide to English Literature: From Blake to Lawrence*. Vol. II. New York, McGraw Publishers.
- Leech, G. N. (1969). *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. London: Longman
- Maurice, C. (1994). *The Romantic Movement*. Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Selden, R. (1989). *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction*. London: Harvester Wheat sheaf.
- Selden, R. et al. (1997). *A Reader's Guide to contemporary Literary Theory*. Fourth Edition: London: Prentice Hall.
- Stumpf, S. E. (1989). *Philosophy: History and Problems*. New York: McGraw Hill Book Company.
- Williams, J. (1996). *William Wordsworth: A Literary Life*. London: McMillan Press LTD.
- Wimsatt, W. K., et al. (1970). *Romantic Criticism: A Short History*. London: Routledge & kegan Paul.