



Patterns, functions, and descriptions of English: Mid-term exercise.

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I. Transitivity

This analysis compares the transitivity in two short texts relating to the same topic, the sinking of *Titanic*. The method of the systemic functional analysis is to assign functions to the components in each clause and compare the findings to see whether any significant differences occur. To understand the differences, one must also see the semantics of the clauses and see to whom the processes are ascribed, i.e., who functions as the Participant, but starting by the analysis, the results are as follows:

Text A:

The immense icebergs	drifted	slowly	across the ocean
Actor	Process: material	Circumstance: quality	Circumstance: space

The ship's band	played	as	the rich and poor	prayed
Actor	Process: material	Circumstance: time		
		Actor	Process: material	

The officers	watched	in horror	as	the ship	failed to slow down
Behaver	Process: behavioural	Circumstance: quality	Circumstance: reason		
			Actor	Process: material	

A minute later	the lights	went out	
Circumstance: time	Actor	Process: material	
and	the stern of the ship	rose	into the air
	Actor	Process: material	Circumstance: space

It	stood	almost vertically	for 30 seconds
Actor	Process: material	Circumstance: quality	Circumstance

Everyone	was	terrified
Carrier	Process: relational, attributive	Attribute

Text B:

Moody	realized	the extent of the danger.	
Senser	Process: mental	Phenomenon	

He	told	his officers	to reverse the engines
Sayer	Process: verbal	Receiver	Verbiage

A passenger	passed	his two young sons	through the human chain into the life-boat
Actor	Process: material	Goal	Circumstance: space

Captain Smith	warned	the crew on the upper deck	
Sayer	Process: verbal	Receiver	

and	ordered	an iceberg watch	from the crow's nest
	Process: verbal	Receiver	Circumstance: space

but	he	never slackened	the ship's speed of 22 knots.
	Actor	Process: material	Goal

Text A displays events from a very general point of view. The clauses are quite short although the use of circumstances gives the narrative more information relating to location and manner. The processes in Text A are intransitive. A typical clause is Material process where the Actor is an inanimate object, putting humans in a passive position of Behavers or Actors of verbs such as 'pray' (which verges towards being a mental process). Yet wherever humans are Participants, they are defined only by occupation (the ship's band, officers) or status (the rich and poor); no individuals are named. There is only one instance of a relational process, again using a vague pronoun as Carrier; there are no mental or verbal processes.

In a striking contrast to Text A, Text B consists only of human Doer-Participants. Out of the six processes in the excerpt, three are verbal processes and one is mental, categories of which there were none in Text A. All processes are carried out by human participants; although some of the participants are left unnamed, nobody remains as anonymous as those in Text A, as they are all either given a name or a relationship to the named characters ('[Moody's] officers'). Moreover, all verbs display a second Participant (a Goal, Receiver, Phenomena or Verbiage).

The different choices of style in the examples demonstrate how transitivity affects the reading. The events in Text A are initiated by inanimate Actors: whatever the people are doing they do as a passive mass, and they are limited to actions such as praying or watching. As the people are thus stripped of any power, their incapability of acting in the crisis is emphasised, the inanimate becoming the main agents. Meanwhile, Text B puts human individuals into focus, turning the Participants into active and aware protagonists, pulling them out of Example A's passivity by lifting the Actors heroes above the less defined group. The action in B is also moved onwards as the Processes are directed towards something, the events thus not merely happening separately. Of course, this does not necessarily change the reader's understanding of the texts, but it does give each writing a subtle stylistic viewpoint.

II. Theme

The data for this analysis of Themes and Rhemes consists of the opening paragraphs for two novels: *Winnie the Pooh* by A. A. Milne and Jane Austen's *Emma*. To label the components according to the model of Systemic Functional Grammar, I shall present the extracts in the following tables:

Text A — *Winnie the Pooh*:

(1) Once upon a time, a very long time ago now, about last Friday,	Winnie-the-Pooh lived in a forest all by himself under the name of Sanders.
Theme	Rheme

(2a) One day when he was out walking,	he came to an open place in the middle of the forest	
Theme	Rheme	
(2b) and in the middle of this place	was a large oak-tree	
Theme <i>textual experiential</i>	Rheme	
(2c) and from the top of the tree	there came a loud buzzing-noise.	
Theme <i>textual experiential</i>	Rheme	

(3) Winnie-the-Pooh	sat down at the foot of the tree.
Theme	Rheme

(4a) He	put his head between his paws	(4b) and he	began to think.
Theme	Rheme	Theme <i>textual experiential</i>	Rheme

Text B — *Emma*:

(1) Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition,	seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence;
Theme	Rheme

(2) she	had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.
Theme	Rheme

(3a) She	was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father	
Theme	Rheme	
(3b) and she	had, in consequence of her sister's marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period	
Theme <i>textual experiential</i>	Rheme	

(4a) Her mother	had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses
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Theme	Rheme
(4b) and her place	had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection
Theme <i>textual</i> <i>experimental</i>	Rheme

A first-glance observation is that all clauses in both texts are declarative clauses with unmarked Themes, i.e., the Experiential Theme is either the Subject or an Adjunct of the clause. Both texts also feature complex sentences as well as compound sentences: the Themes in all main clauses have been marked, whereas those of subordinate clauses have not.

In spite of their similarities, the structures of the Themes differ in some ways. Text A begins with as many as four clauses (Clauses 1-2c) where the Theme is an Adjunct. The eponymous protagonist ‘Winnie the Pooh’ of Rheme 1 is referred back to in part of Theme 2a, but overall the Themes describe place and time of the setting rather than the character. Themes 2a-2c is built up as a Zig-zag Pattern, as Rheme 2a is picked up by Theme 2b and Rheme 2b by Theme 2c. Next, Clause 3 is the first one with a Subject as Theme, again with Pooh as Theme. The topic throughout the rest of the text in a Reiteration Pattern; the pronouns in Themes in Clauses 4a and 4b refer back to the same person, the grammatical cohesion thus upholding ‘Winnie the Pooh’ as Theme.

A Reiteration Pattern is present also in Text B, but here it is even more prominent: the protagonist is introduced in Clause 1, already in the Theme component. From there on, all Experiential Themes tie back to Theme 1 in some way, and no Themes are Adjuncts. Not until 4a does the pattern change slightly, the focus shifting to Emma Woodhouse’s mother. Both the Theme and Rheme of 4a tie back to preceding text with topic of the mistress of the house and the use of a 3PS poss. pron. After this short example of a Zig-Zag Pattern the text resumes to a Reiteration Pattern, but now the Theme has changed to refer to Emma’s mother, rather than once again Emma herself.

In conclusion, the key difference is that Text A by Milne uses some Adjuncts as Themes, and uses more techniques to switch themes already from early on, the Zig-zag pattern of his Sentence 2 not appearing in Austen’s text until the final sentence. Milne jumps directly into the story by using his Sentence 1 as a hyper-theme before going on to describe various circumstances and things featured in his story. Meanwhile Austen’s technique introduces her heroine in a more throughout way before moving on to describe other matters. It is merely a different way of story-telling, no better or worse, but it is interesting how authors choose to open their novels introduce the environment.

III. Synonymy

This part will consider the meanings of two words, *ill* and *sick*, the similarities and differences in their use. The words were looked up by a simple query in the BNC_Baby_Complete corpus, followed by the results then being thinned down to 100 hits per word.

Both words appear to be in equally frequent use. The word *ill* gave 192 hits and *sick* 202 hits, making the ratio over 9:10. Interestingly, when running the query in the subcorpus BNC_Baby_Conversation, limited only to data concerning spoken language, the ratio was 1:2, *ill* and *sick* yielding 42 and 84 hits respectively, this indicating that although the words are nearly equally frequent, they are used in different domains.

The most common meanings for both words relate to bad health and medical conditions, the words being used to describe someone ‘being ill’ or ‘being sick’. The phrase ‘ill health’ had several instances of use, health being the most frequent collocate of *ill*; the phrase ‘feel sick’ was also common, the wordforms of *feel* being the highest ranked

collocates for *sick*. Other phrases relating to health were ‘mentally ill’ and ‘critically ill, ‘chronically sick’ and ‘sick over the rail’. Yet although these phrases all relate to health, the two words in focus are used in different ways. The phrase ‘feel sick’, for instance, was significantly more used than ‘feel ill’, there were no instances of ‘mentally sick’, and unlike *ill*, *sick* functioned as a noun referring to a group of sick people.

The major differences in the two words’ meanings, however, can best be seen in their more figurative uses where they do not refer to health but to emotions or thoughts. Meaning something being bad, *ill* is frequently used as adjective to modify other words, such as in ‘ill manners’, ‘ill will, and ‘ill temper’. The word also describes the verbal action ‘speak ill of [something]’ as well as ‘think ill of [something]’. It is also used to describe emotions in the phrase ‘ill at ease’.

Contrastingly, when *sick* is used to describe emotions it appears to compare an emotion to an actual physical sensation of nausea, examples of phrases being ‘be worried sick’, be sick of [something]’, and most obviously ‘sick to his stomach’ to express disgust. Unlike *ill*, *sick* in these instances refers to phenomena directly relating to human experiences and physical states rather than characteristics, and does not function as a modifier but as a predicate complement describing people. *Sick* is also used to describe a situation in general, a state or an event, such as in ‘That’s sick!’ (KCU 1782). All of these expressions are rather colloquial and are to be found in Conversation data, which could explain why *sick* is more prominent in the spoken domain.

To conclude, although both *sick* and *ill* are used in context of health and well-being, *ill* additionally takes over the describing of something as being bad in general, whereas *sick* means bad in a more metaphorical way. Although this could be thought of as making the range of *sick* limited in comparison, both words are used just as frequently, in spite of *sick*’s slight victory.

Book used for help in analyses:

Thompson, Geoff (1996). *Introducing functional grammar*. 3rd ed. Abingdon: Routledge.