

Analysis of Language Variants and Social Differences from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics— A Case Study of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

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Abstract: This study uses the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics to explore language variations and social differences among different characters in Mark Twain's classic novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. By collecting textual data from the novel, the study compares the language choices in dialogues of different characters at the lexical and grammatical levels, and conducts in-depth analysis to reflect the social differences among characters and the social issues and cultural conflicts in the novel. Furthermore, this paper analyzes the speech processes, psychological processes, and relational processes of different characters from the perspective of transitivity, aiming to reveal the functions, structures, and communicative intentions behind the language use of different characters, as well as the relationship between these language variations and the social background, in order to help readers better understand the work. Through this research and its results, the paper aims to provide a demonstration for the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics in the exploration of language in novels and the analysis of literary studies, and to open up new perspectives for novel and literary research.

1. Introduction

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* holds a significant position in American literature. The novel is renowned for its vivid narrative and profound social critique, exploring complex issues of racial discrimination, social class, and human nature. Hemingway once praised Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a book unlike any other, stating that all American literature comes from it and that there is no other work comparable to it [1]. The novel not only portrays the customs and traditions of Southern society in the 19th century but also showcases the differences in language use among different social classes and cultural backgrounds through various character depictions.

This study aims to apply the theoretical framework and methods of Systemic Functional Linguistics to analyze language variants and differences in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the perspectives of vocabulary grammar analysis and transitivity. It also seeks to explore their

influence on character development and social issues. By closely examining the language differences among different characters in the novel, the study intends to reveal the close connection between language and society. Moreover, it aims to provide a method and example for the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics in literary research. Through the results and discussions of this study, it is hoped that the interpretation of the novel can be expanded, while providing new perspectives and insights for research in related fields.

2. Theoretical Background

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a functional linguistic theory that emphasizes the close relationship between language structure and language function. In SFL, a system refers to the manifestation of vertical agglomeration relationships in any level of language (such as phonology, grammar, semantics, etc.); a system has two or more options (referred to as "terms" or "features") to choose from [2]. According to SFL, language exists to fulfill specific communicative purposes, and different language structures reflect different language functions. When studying language variants and social differences, SFL provides a powerful theoretical framework that helps researchers explore the purposes and intentions behind language use, as well as the interactive relationship between language and social backgrounds.

Halliday believes that language consists of three semantic systems: the semantic layer, the lexical grammar layer, and the phonological layer. Lexical grammar is not grammar for the sake of grammar; its purpose is to express meaning. In SFL, language expression has three main metafunctions: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function [3]. In the lexical grammar layer, vocabulary is considered the basic unit of language and the carrier of meaning. The choice, use, and collocation of vocabulary reflect the speaker's intentions, emotions, and social background. In the analysis of SFL, the study of the lexical grammar layer aims to explore the interaction between vocabulary and grammar, categorizing vocabulary as part of grammar, revealing how vocabulary choice affects sentence structure, and how sentence structure affects vocabulary use. Halliday proposes three steps for analyzing discourse: first, lexical grammar analysis, which is the basis of analysis; second, comment on these lexical grammar features, placing them in the context of discourse, even cultural context; "link to other social meaning systems for analysis," "because a discourse is a very complex phenomenon." [4] By analyzing the relationship between vocabulary and grammatical functions, one can better understand the purpose and intent of character speech use.

The transitivity system is a sub-system of the ideational function at the grammatical level, which includes three parts: participants, processes, and circumstances. In addition, Halliday summarizes six major categories of transitivity systems, namely material processes, behavioral processes, mental processes, relational processes, verbal processes, and existential processes [5]. Material processes mainly emphasize the actions and activities of actors and targets; behavioral processes focus on the behaviors, manners, and expressions of actors; mental processes focus on internal psychological activities such as thinking, perception, and emotion; relational processes are used to describe specific relationships between entities; verbal processes focus on describing the process and manner of speech communication; existential processes involve the existence, appearance, or materialization of entities. Among them, verbal processes, relational processes, and mental processes are directly related to this research. Therefore, this paper mainly explores the relationship between transitivity and language variants and social differences from these three processes.

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3. Analysis of Language Variants and Social Differences in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

3.1. Lexical Grammar Analysis

The analysis of lexical grammar choices can reveal how language differences reflect social backgrounds and relationships between characters. The vocabulary choices, grammatical structures, dialects and slang, emotional vocabulary and rhetorical devices, as well as narrative structures and changes in sentence patterns used by different characters in the novel, can reflect the social differences between them.

(1) "I got a fish-line, but I can't catch no fish" [6]

"But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before." [6]

In example (1), a quote from the protagonist of the book, Huckleberry Finn, is used. "...but I can't catch no fish" uses double negation, as Paul Fussell describes in his book "Class," language itself often reflects a person's social class, such as only the lower class would say something like "I can't get no satisfaction" containing multiple negations, while in the middle class and elite there is no such language expression [7]. In the book, Huck uses a lot of language with double negation, for example, "I ain't got no money," where Huck uses the word "ain't," which can be a contraction of am not, is not, are not, has not, have not, etc., in context, the correct phrase should be "I have got money." This usage indicates that people who use "ain't" often do not understand formal English grammar well, reflecting Huck's non-standard grammar and colloquial style, consistent with his lower social status. In the second sentence of example (1), "I reckon" (I guess), local slang is used instead of more formal vocabulary. Additionally, "... I been there before." omits "have" in the sentence, a grammatical error that further fits his social status.

As the protagonist and narrator of the story, Huck comes from a lower-class family, and his language use is closer to local dialects and slang, full of Southern accents and dialect features. His language style is more colloquial and straightforward, reflecting his upbringing and social status. His language use often includes non-standard grammar and pronunciation, as well as informal vocabulary, such as simple and direct usage, omission of articles, verb inflections, and sentence simplification. This linguistic characteristic makes his language more close to the everyday speech of the local people, highlighting his identity as a rural poor child and reflecting his cultural background of coming from a marginalized society with a lack of formal education.

(2) "We's safe, Huck, we's safe! Jump up and crack yo' heels! Dat's de good ole Cairo at las', I jis knows it!" [6]

"No, sah -- I doan' budge a step out'n dis place 'dout a DOCTOR, not if it's forty year!"[6]

"Doan' hurt me -- don't! I hain't ever done no harm to a ghos'. I alwuz liked dead people, en done all I could for 'em. You go en git in de river agin, whah you b'longs, en doan' do nuffn to Ole Jim, 'at 'uz awluz yo' fren'."[6]

Example (2) quotes Jim's words. In the first sentence "We's safe..." uses a non-standard verb form, for example, abbreviating "is" to "s", reflecting his identity as a slave and cultural oppression. "Jump up and crack yo' heels." uses "yo'" which reflects Jim's specific black dialect as a slave, whose language is restricted by race and social status. His language contains non-standard grammatical structures and vocabulary, highlighting his status in society at that time. The many grammatical errors in the two sentences reflect his low level of education. Additionally, in the second sentence, Jim's language is full of care and concern for Huck. He calls Huck "Huck," showing his affection for Huck, demonstrating the social relationship between the two. In the third sentence, the vocabulary choice shows Jim, as a black slave, being humble in his address to Huck,

whom he mistakenly thought was a water ghost, expressing his respect and obedience as a slave.

Jim is an African-American slave, and his language use reflects his social status and discrimination. In the novel, Jim's language is often described as "black slave language" or "dialect," which was considered lowly and not valued by society at the time. Jim's language often includes non-standard grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, reflecting his identity as a slave and the cultural oppression he faced. Through Jim's language, the novel reveals the control of language by the slave system and the discrimination that existed, while through the vocabulary choices in Jim's conversations with Huck, it shows Jim's care, dependence, and obedience to Huck. This linguistic form adds a dimension of historical background and social status to Jim's character, making readers better understand his environment and situation.

3.2. Transitivity

Using the first half of Chapter 16 of the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an example, this analysis focuses on the speech process, mental process, and relational process. Through these three processes, the relationship between transitivity and language variants and social differences in the novel is explored. The selected section is approximately 2000 words.

Table 1: The transitivity analysis of Chapter 16

Process Types	Number	Percentage
Verbal Process	33	80.5%
Mental Process	6	14.6%
Relational Process	2	4.9%

From Table 1, it can be seen that in this section, verbal processes have the highest proportion, followed by mental processes and relational processes. Since the entire novel is narrated from the perspective of the protagonist Huckleberry Finn, the important plot points are mainly developed through conversations between Huckleberry Finn and other characters. Based on this, the proportion of verbal processes is the highest. In addition, this section focuses on describing the process of Huckleberry Finn's attitude towards Jim changing. At this point, Huckleberry Finn no longer sees Jim as just a black slave, but begins to have doubts. However, he is still haunted by his inherent beliefs and the conscience shaped by social norms, hence the frequency of mental processes is the second highest.

Table 2: The Verbal Processes Analysis of Chapter 16

Participants	Quantity	Percentage
Huckleberry Finn and the sailors	22	66.7%
Huckleberry Finn and Jim	10	30.3%
Huckleberry Finn and himself	1	3.0%

The verbal process refers to the way and process of exchanging information through speech, involving four participants: the Sayer, the Receiver, the Verbiage, and the Target. Verbal processes mainly focus on the verbal communication activities between people, including dialogue, statements, descriptions, commands, requests, and other speech acts. In verbal processes, language is used to express thoughts, emotions, intentions, and to establish connections and interactions with others. Verbal processes not only involve the way language is expressed but also the intentions and purposes behind verbal behavior. Based on the analysis of Table 2, in this part of the novel, verbal processes mainly occur between Huckleberry Finn and the sailors, aiming to illustrate Huckleberry Finn's struggle to deceive the sailors in order to protect Jim. In the process of dialogue, Huckleberry Finn uses words and grammar that are noticeably more formal and respectful compared to his

dialogue with Jim. Furthermore, through their conversations, Huckleberry Finn lies about Jim's race, while the sailors use terms like "nigger," which clearly reflect the racial discrimination and segregation in American society at that time. The sailors' attitudes towards Huckleberry Finn and Jim depend on their racial identity, demonstrating the influence of race on social status and treatment. Although both Huckleberry Finn and Jim belong to the lower social class, Jim's black identity leads to a significant social difference between them. In the dialogue between Huckleberry Finn and Jim, Huckleberry Finn's tone is noticeably more relaxed compared to his conversations with the sailors, and his choice of vocabulary and grammar is more casual, such as the use of "warn't" and "knowed," which align with his status. Additionally, Huckleberry Finn uses a lot of slang and idioms, such as "I reckon," "ain't," and some locally specific words, making the novel more humorous and fitting the characters' images, portraying a multidimensional image of an uneducated, runaway boy from the lower class. In contrast, Jim's goal in the verbal processes is to reach Cairo and become a free man, no longer being bought and sold. At the lexical and grammatical level, Jim's language is more casual, filled with numerous grammatical errors, inappropriate word choices, and specific "black" expressions, all of which vividly reflect Jim's identity as a black slave. For example, Jim's words, "We's safe, Huck, we's safe! Jump up and crack yo' heels! Dat's de good ole Cairo at las', I jis knows it!" [6], are inappropriate in terms of wording and grammar, fitting his status. Moreover, from this sentence, Jim's optimism and hope can be seen. Combining the entire novel, although Jim faces oppression and difficulties, his language always reveals a pursuit of faith and hope. When facing challenges, he often expresses his religious beliefs or hopes in dialogue to bring strength and courage to himself and Huckleberry Finn. Finally, Huckleberry Finn's verbal processes with himself reveal his guilt and conflicts because he realizes that helping Jim escape is against the law and moral standards. He begins to question his actions, feeling despicable and condemned. This is because Huckleberry Finn is influenced by social moral concepts, being taught that black slaves are property and should be controlled by their owners. However, his friendship with Jim and his humanity lead him to question this belief, resulting in internal conflict. Through the verbal processes with his conscience, Huckleberry Finn begins to reflect on his actions and values. He realizes his internal conflict and contemplates how to deal with it. This inner struggle and contemplation reflect his growth and self-awareness process. This process not only reflects Huckleberry Finn's inner struggles but also highlights the social differences between the two characters. The goal of this section of verbal processes is to reveal Huckleberry Finn's inner struggles. According to the metaphorical function analysis of systemic functional linguistics, this passage also metaphorically depicts the social phenomenon of black people being treated as private property and deprived of their rights during that era.

Table 3: The Mental Processes Analysis of Chapter 16

Verb	Participant	
	Perceiver	Phenomenon
get	I	it
got to	I	feeling
says	I	conscience
felt	I	easy and happy
got	I	decision
tried	I	truth

The psychological process focuses on internal mental activities such as thinking, perception, and emotions. This category includes three main types: perception, emotion, and cognition. The clause structure of a psychological process involves Senser + Process + Phenomenon [5].

As shown in Table 3, in the six instances of psychological processes, the subject is "I," referring

to Huckleberry Finn. This part mainly describes Huckleberry Finn's psychological journey regarding whether to conceal or protect Jim, thus showcasing his psychological transformation. It begins with Huckleberry Finn wavering on the question of "why he is helping Jim escape," initially believing that it is only natural for Jim, being a black man, to be treated as a slave. However, he later feels a sense of conscience for aiding Jim and ultimately decides to help him after a dialogue with his conscience, feeling immensely relieved afterwards. However, he then realizes Jim's goodwill towards him and chooses to conceal the truth, ultimately aiding Jim. This entire process is illustrated through six psychological processes. Throughout this process, the unequal status and identity of the two are highlighted, as Huckleberry Finn still considers Jim to be a black slave, while Jim primarily feels dependent on and submissive to Huckleberry Finn, thus at this point, the two have not truly become friends.

The relational process includes processes of "being" and "having," helping to understand attributes or identify identities. The clause structure of a relational process involves Carrier + Process + Attribute; and for identification, Identified + Process + Identifier [5]. The relational processes in this part illustrate Jim's change in social status from being subordinate to others to becoming a free man.

4. Conclusion

In the novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain cleverly demonstrates the influence of social status and background on individual language expression through different characters' language variants. From Huckleberry Finn's Southern accent and dialect to Jim's constrained black dialect, the language characteristics of each character profoundly reflect their social environment and identity. Through the analysis of vocabulary selection and grammar, we find significant differences in vocabulary choice among different characters. These differences reflect the characters' social status, cultural background, and identity. This difference not only reveals the social differences between characters but also reflects the social issues and cultural conflicts in the novel. The novel's use of transitivity processes, mental processes, and relational processes analyzed the language variants, social differences, and character psychology reflected at the grammatical level.

The use of language in literary works is a powerful means of expression, which can help authors vividly depict characters, showcase social differences, and provoke readers' thoughts on issues such as social status, identity, and racial relations. Language variants can be used to depict differences and conflicts between different social groups, highlight social issues and inequalities. They can also be used to reflect characters' identity and cultural heritage, showcase social and cultural diversity, reveal the complex social relations behind character images, and examine the operability of Halliday's systemic functional linguistics in analyzing literary works.

However, this study has some limitations. Firstly, our study is limited to the language variants and language differences in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which may not cover all relevant issues and perspectives. Additionally, since the research object is a novel, our analysis results may be influenced by the author's subjective creation and narrative choices. Future research should expand the scope of the study to include more literary works and language materials to explore more dimensions and influencing factors of language variants and language differences in depth.

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