

# linguistic features of literary theme: some halliday-type principles applied to 'surfacing' (margareth atwood 1972)

M. Nélia Scott \*

## INTRODUCTION

Halliday divides the functions of language into three 'macro-functions' which he calls: Ideational function, expressing content, or the propositional content of the speaker's experiences of the real and inner world; Interpersonal function, which is the means whereby we achieve communication, taking on speech rôles viz-à-viz other people, complaining, narrating, enquiring, encouraging, etc.; and Textual function, which serves to connect discourse, weaving it together. Under this latter function comes the notion of cohesion. Phoric elements are parts of the reference system needed for a text to be cohesive. We elucidate and refer to 'phoric' elements in more detail below. It is important to note that all these three macro-functions are present at the same time in a text.

Halliday describes the choice of (sets of different) options the speaker makes in the language system, to express his experiences. 'All options are embedded in the language system: the system is a network of options, deriving from all the various functions of language' (1973:111) Thus a certain choice of (one set of different) options rather than another can be said to have been motivated by what the speaker (or writer) wanted to mean — to convey or emphasize. Prominence of certain features in a text, then, stands out in a particular way, suggesting or pressing the reader to take notice of it, this recognition contributing towards a more complete understanding of the writer's work. This is Halliday's intention in his study of The Inheritors (Halliday 1973:103-43).

---

\* Aluna do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês e Literatura Correspondente  
- UFSC.

The Inheritors focuses on the limitations and helplessness of Neanderthal man facing 'the new people' (homo sapiens), who represent another, more sophisticated culture. To do this William Golding uses two different kinds of style: one representing options made by Neanderthal man, the other the choice of options in the language made by 'the new people', homo sapiens. Halliday's study is based on how William Golding, whether consciously or not, shifts language to mirror the different visions of the world the characters have, in the story. Lok, the main Neanderthal character, cannot understand homo sapiens, his inventions and behaviour, because he does not participate in them; his understanding of 'the new people' is confined to his own vision of the world, making it rather hard for us (homo sapiens readers) to interpret it. Homo sapiens on the other hand is described in less 'marked' language, linguistically.

By means of a syntax count, Halliday shows that Golding represents Lok's thoughts and reactions and vision of the world, by such features in the transitivity system of English, as transitive verbs like grab used intransitively: 'he grabbed at the branches'; also, 'a high proportion of the subjects (exactly half) of the subjects are not people; they are either parts of the body (8) or inanimate objects (20), and of the human subjects half again (14) are found in clauses which are not clauses of action.' (1973:123). This feature (unlike the language used by Golding when describing 'the new people') creates an atmosphere of ineffectual activity, which reflects the theme of 'The Inheritors': Neanderthal man is doomed.

#### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

By examining 'The Inheritors' in the way described above, Halliday goes beyond what most literary critics do. He brings to light what motivated the writer to choose certain syntactic structures rather than others, and shows the significance this choice lends to a more complete understanding of the work. Linguistic prominence may not in all cases be motivated by the

choice of the subject the writer is treating — for instance, the fact that Margaret Atwood writes in Canadian English is linguistically prominent but not motivated by the theme. When prominence is motivated, as Halliday suggests is the case in Golding's choice of language to fit the theme, it reflects the writer's knowledge of and sensitivity to the subject-matter.

Going still further in considering the value of motivated prominence, it seems worth speculating that in certain cases the absence of it may account for 'flaws' in works of literature.

It is common to find flaws in a story because the characters do not sound convincing: what they say and sometimes how they say it does not fit their rôle. For example Nelly Dean, in 'Wuthering Heights', is only a house-keeper, but her sensitive articulation and knowledge of certain details surprise the reader.

It is also the case that characters' rôles are restricted to the writer's experience and knowledge of the world, for obvious reasons. In the case of male writers it has often been said that they draw their female characters from their own masculine experience. This is how Virginia Woolf sees it:

'It is becoming daily more evident that Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Ophelia, Clarissa, Dora, Diana, Helen and the rest are by no means what they pretend to be. Some are plainly men in disguise.' (1979:64) "I have the feeling of a woman", says Bathsheba in Far From the Madding Crowd, "but I have only the language of men." (1979:65)

Finally, it is common in conventional literature to have the writer tell the reader how he wants the characters to be interpreted. Thus, Charles Dickens' novels are written as depiction: David Copperfield, or Sam Weller, may speak as they would, but are described by Dickens from the outside, so to speak, using not Copperfieldian or Wellerian linguistic prominences but Dickensian linguistic prominences. This is not a 'flaw', of course, but still places the writer as mediator

between reader and character with a consequent distancing effect.

Margaret Atwood, like William Golding, makes her story more convincing because the line of the plot, in this Hallidayan view, conditions the line of the options in the language, flowing as in a graph. Again like William Golding, Margaret Atwood shows she is in control of what she wants to convey; in her case, being a woman writer, she knows how another woman feels. Being aware of language, as will be shown below, she uses the language motif to convey the condensed, intense, and confused state of mind of the main character.

It is to discuss what may have motivated Margaret Atwood to write 'Surfacing' in the way she did, — the importance in my view of the underlined language motif as an extended image of how the use of language is motivated by the subject-matter, the changes of tense which occur in Part I, II and III respectively — that I think Halliday's approach will be most useful. I will also consider Halliday's notion of cohesion, which he considers elsewhere, because it is of striking relevance to the texture of the novel.

#### THE LANGUAGE MOTIF

'Surfacing' is the story of a woman who travels from the big city where she has been living, to the interior, where she spent some of her early life, in search of her father, who has suddenly disappeared. This trip can be taken literally or as a symbolic search for her long lost identity. In order to find the 'split self' she regresses, going through a process of 'involution' as it were, losing layer by layer her connections with civilization, including human language.

She wants to achieve a primitive state of mind where she can identify with everything, including the Gods.

After she follows certain rules she acquires mystical powers, which enable her to understand the language of the Gods, and has a vision of her dead mother who, in front of her eyes,

turns into a jay. Her father is a wolf, at other times a fish.

'Surfacing' was written in the early 70's, in the middle of the psychedelic movement, the search for Oriental religion, awareness of ecology, and the Vietnam war. It can be said to be a novel of its time.

There is a conflict of values: the 'Americans' (who may in fact be Canadian) represent authoritarianism, domination of nature, machine-control; they are also controlled by their own machines. On the other side are people like the 'group' in the novel, dissatisfied with society's values, with the rôle of women, and with what society offers them and demands of them.

The novel is in a sense an extended metaphor because it is about the inner life of the narrator, who 'dives' to look for her father, for her child, for herself. Surfacing, she comes back from a descent where she encounters a vision, and comes back with some knowledge.

In order to 'dive', the nameless narrator has to liberate herself from the constraints of language.

The narrator's dissociation with language happens gradually. Language is a motif, which, like the camera and the bottles in the story, represents limitation of an enclosed view of the universe. It is relevant now to see some passages in the novel where both the writer and the narrator want the reader to notice its underlined importance.

At first the narrator is very conscious of how language divides the French Canadians from the others. Her family is set apart — 'les anglais':

'But the truth is I don't know what the villagers thought or talked about, I was so shut off from them. The older ones occasionally crossed themselves when we passed, possibly because my mother was wearing slacks, but even that was never explained. Although we played during visits with the solemn, slightly hostile children of Paul and Madame, the games were brief and wordless.' (p. 63)

She notices accents: 'the woman says with only a trace of an accent' (p. 15), and suffers discrimination when she speaks to the locals in French, betraying her origins. The psychological effect causes her 'throat to constrict, as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing.' (p. 14)

Then, she finds language is deceiving. Words no longer mean what they once expressed. They are now used to transmit certain manipulated slogans like most of what David says; Joe wants her to say she loves him; she thinks 'I do give a shit about you' means the same. (p. 104)

She sees positive values in Joe because he is often 'off in the place inside himself where he spends most of his time' (p. 52). They talk very little; Joe does not engage in useless verbalization as more civilized men, like David, do. Joe is closer to his own primitive origin, and uses language, like the birds, to defend his territory. She believes language must be used economically, with a purpose, like the birds do: 'they sing for the same reason trucks honk, to proclaim their territory: a rudimentary language. Linguistics, I should have studied that instead of art.' (p. 48)

In Chapter 6 the narrator is immersed in frightening fantasy when Anna comes to her rescue. '"Help", I think at her silently, "talk", and she does', breaking the spell. (p. 70) This marks the beginning of her quest; to get into the mood, she has realized that language is an impediment as it first was, stopping the narrator from entering the community life of the neighbours.

In Chapter 9, she finds that 'I was seeing poorly, translating badly, a dialect problem, I should have used my own.' (p. 91). The reality had been changed because of the language frame that it was meant to fit. Later we discover that what the narrator means here, is that the truth about her abortion had to be hidden, rubbed out, because of her family and their friends. In their simple world there are no words to

fit a non-conventional concept like abortion. She now finds a new path of discovery to follow; she has the past enclosed in her hand.

'Time is compressed like a fist I close on my knee in the darkening bedroom, I hold inside it the clues and solutions and power for what I must do now.' (p. 91)

What she does is to dive deep down in the blurred waters of her unconscious mind. She sees 'a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes...' (p. 167). It triggers her memory to reveal what she had hidden from herself for years, the abortion and the non-existent husband.

After her determination to find the truth she can no longer use words to form the mechanical responses she had elaborated to satisfy people's curiosity, in the way she used to. When Joe asks her to marry him:

"Look", I said. "I have been married before and it didn't work out. I had a baby too." My ace, voice patient. "I don't want to go through that again." It was true, but the words were coming out of me like the mechanical words from a talking doll.' (p. 104-5).

Soon she finds she has to concentrate to talk. 'English words seemed imported, foreign.' (p. 176) Language now belongs to the everyday world. Where she is, she is slowly losing touch with it. She spends more and more time inside her own head.

At the end of Part II, she has released her fist, slowly coming up to the surface again. She has lost human language: 'I no longer have a name' (p. 198) and is ready to 'Immerse myself in the other language', the language of the Gods (p. 185). Her child, who surfaces from the lake forgiving her, is a child of the Gods and she 'will never teach it any words' (p. 191). When the men come looking for her, she knows they are talking but she cannot recognize which language they speak; 'their voices are distinct but they penetrate my ears as sounds...' (p. 215)

The language motif follows her 'involution', her descent to the origins, and surfaces with her hopes that she no longer needs to be a victim of social convention if she is to have Joe: 'We will have to talk' (p. 224) — unlike what they are used to doing.

This is evidence that the language dissociation process provides a platform from where we can look at some linguistic prominences in the novel with more certainty of their being motivated by the theme.

Another aspect which has been enlightened by the language motif is the way the novel reflects its time, the early 70's interest in Oriental religions, contemplation, oneness with nature, etc. To get to a state of contemplation a complete dissociation from language is necessary, in order to achieve a total identity with nature or the universe. At the end of the book the narrator says 'The animals have no need for speech. Why talk when you are a word. I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning.' (p. 212). It is a feature of the times, the search for contemplation, for the lost soul. In this sense the language motif is part of the theme.

#### PROMINENT FEATURES

In analysing tense change and 'phoric' features of cohesion in 'Surfacing', I make no claim, unlike Halliday, to be able to produce a full syntactic count. In this respect my work is less scientific. Nevertheless, it is obvious when reading the novel that the style does not follow the conventional linguistic patterns novelists use.

#### tense changes

'It is customary for novelists and story writers to use the Past Tense to describe imaginary happenings (whether past, present or future with respect to real time), so that the employment of the Simple Present in fiction (except in direct speech) strikes one as a deviation from normal practice.'

(Leech 1971:12)

In Part I, most of the story is told in the simple present, when the narrator is describing 'events now', to be distinguished from memories of past experiences (the distant past, her childhood, and most of the near past, her life in the city), by use of the simple past tense.

In Part III, however, the story is told in the conventional tense form as described by Leech — no distinction is drawn in tense usage between memories and 'events now'. In Part III she reverts to the norm established in Part I.

I would not try to justify what could simply be the writer's inconsistency, if it were not for the evidence already given, of the writer's awareness of, and purposeful use of language devices. As it is, I will attempt to suggest that purpose in changing tenses in this way may be to mark her change of attitude. In Part II the narrator's attitude and awareness change: 'From where I am now it seems as if I've always known, everything,...' (p. 91, 1st page of Part II). What she had always known had been repressed, but came to the surface when she saw the vision at the bottom of the lake. She checks herself, and admits to the reader that there has been a misconception. There never was a wedding or a child.

'They scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them' (p. 168). She had not been able to cope with this truth so 'I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd almost lived in it until now.' (p. 169)

It is the recognition of having sinned against nature, by agreeing to the abortion, that distinguishes Part II from Part I and motivates the linguistic change. The recognition of her sin brings her in Part III to an absolved and absolute vision of the universe, and she surfaces with new life

'within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it

has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds.' (p.191)

The pattern of tense changes in the novel is clearly there to be seen in accordance with the above analysis. It is not, however, total, absolute. It is thus not at all clear why, on at least two occasions (p. 28, p. 54), when she describes her memories of her non-existent husband in Part I, she uses the simple present tense instead of the expected simple past.

### 'phoric' elements

The other prominent feature to be considered is what Halliday calls 'phoric' elements.

In order to avoid repeating the same word or phrase unnecessarily, a speaker uses items such as he, them, she, it, etc., the 'phoric' elements, which indicate that their reference must be sought elsewhere in the context or situation.

Linguists distinguish three kinds of reference: 'anaphoric' reference, which points back in the discourse context; 'cataphoric' reference, which points forward in the context; and 'exophoric' reference, which refers to objects, people, ideas etc. outside the text, either in the situation surrounding the discourse or in shared knowledge.

On the seventh line of this page, the word she refers back — 'anaphorically' — to 'the narrator', mentioned many times previously.

On the sixth line of this page, the word it in "it is thus not at all clear..." is an example of cataphoric reference, in that it refers forward to "why . . . she uses the simple present tense". The pronouns I and you are usually exophoric, in that their reference cannot be retrieved from the context but instead from the situation. 'They've put up the price of gasoline' is another example of exophoric pronoun reference: they is not retrievable from the discourse

context but from shared knowledge — that they must be people, Government authorities or OPEC Ministers.

These 'phoric' elements are all part of the category 'cohesion', ie all the linguistic elements which bind the text together.

As Widdowson says (1975:64): 'In normal circumstances, if one uses he or she, for example, these pronouns refer to someone previously mentioned or someone in the immediate situation of utterance.' In other words the reference should be easily retrieved, either by looking back in the text, or forwards, or else in the world of shared knowledge.

The interesting thing about 'Surfacing' is that in most cases it is very difficult for the reader to know who and what these 'phoric' elements refer to. To illustrate this I choose only a few samples of the rich array displayed in the novel. The narrator's father is almost always 'he'; when we start accepting this deviation as a norm — he meaning her father — she surprises us by introducing another he (p. 28, p. 54) who is her non-existent husband. They and them refer cataphorically to her own family (p. 16) but also to the anonymous 'they' or 'them' (p. 91) exophorically, possibly meaning 'society' 'institutions', etc. More examples of difficult 'phoric' reference are to be found on pages 15, 17, 20, 38, 58, 65, 85, 91, etc. To quote each one would take more space than can be justified in a paper like this, as to show the difficulty of the 'phoric' reference in each case necessarily entails quoting a large chunk of context.

Finally, it is perhaps the 'stream of consciousness' style that brings about the difficulty so often, in retrieving the reference of 'phoric' elements in the novel.

In the 'stream of consciousness' process the narrator knows who the them's and he's and she's are: she holds the framed context inside her mind, so it is natural that she should write them down as they stand as she sees them, it being unnatural for the process of remembering for the narrator to be

constantly bearing her readership in mind.

Thus a similar process happens throughout in such sentences as 'The closest Paul ever got to farming was to have a cow, killed by the milk bottle.' (p. 22) It is not immediately easy to understand 'killed by the milk bottle' because of this linguistic feature of 'private discourse.'

#### WORKS CONSULTED & REFERENCES

- ATWOOD, Margaret      1972, 'Surfacing', Popular Library, CBS
- HALLIDAY, M A K      1973, 'Explorations in the Functions of  
Language', E Arnold
- HALLIDAY, M A K &  
HASAN R      1976, 'Cohesion in English', Longman
- LEECH, G N      1971, 'Meaning and the English Verb',  
Longman
- McTEAR, M F      1979, 'Systemic-Functional Grammar: Some  
Implications for Language Teaching' in  
IRAL, Vol XVII/2, May 1979
- WIDDOWSON, H G      1975, 'Stylistics and the Teaching of  
Literature' Longman
- WOOLF, V      1979, 'Women and Writing' The Women's  
Press