# A Linguistic Account of the Protagonist's Development in the *Grapes of Wrath*

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The novel as a modern literary genre is generally regarded as the realization of its main character's journey from immaturity to a status of maturity. The character, usually an uncomplicated person unable to cope with the complexities of life at first, gains an insight and understanding to handle his/her complex situation accordingly later in the novel. It is usually agreed in both literary criticism and linguistic criticism of literature that everything about a character should be established from the evidence of the text (see Fowler, 1977 & 1996 and Peck & Coyle, 2002, for instance). In the present study, the language of Tom Joad, the main character in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, was analyzed to reveal how his social position is established and how his transformation from a young farm-hand holding a carpe diem philosophy to a socially-wise reformist with a commitment to bettering the future is substantialized. Oriented towards a linguistic study of literature, the present paper employsSystemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the analytic framework. The findings of the study may be useful especially for those involved in teaching English language through literature.
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Novels have been read widely since they began to be written in the fifteenth century Europe, and they have had a range and scope which give them the potential to reflect the real manners of societies. The novel as a modern literary genre (Peck & Coyle, 2002) has two major socially-orientated characteristics. First, it is like a window on the world, which is more apparent when we deal with realistic novels. The novel, according to Peck & Coyle, (2002, p. 114)

> …is a form of literature which looks at people in society. … Most novels are concerned with ordinary people and their problems in the societies in which they find themselves. This is often the case even when the pattern appears to be broken: *Robinson Crusoe* presents a man alone on a desert island; some novels, such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* …, have non-humans as central characters; but even these novels are dealing indirectly with people in the social world.

Second, the main character of the novel, usually an ordinary person unable to make sense of the complexities of his/her society, climbs, through the events of the narrative, up the ladder of social awareness and consciousness and eventually becomes a social human prototype whose footsteps the novelist may want his/her fellow creatures to follow. But one point to remember is that novels do not present a documentary picture of life; they just tell stories. So it is the overall characteristic of the genre that all its features and structures are of linguistic nature; they are created by means of language. Thus as long as the generic study of the novel is concerned, a linguistic analysis of it must be a fruitful one.

Although the concept of genre implies common features and characteristics of a series of literary works, it does not suggest lack of invention or innovation. The manipulation of patterns by the novelist is possible to fulfill special literary purposes or to depict particular events and characters in particular social settings. This can in fact be a source for the uniqueness of the novel which in turn should reveal to us the novelist's interests as well as his/her outlook towards life within the limits of the novel.

This paper presents a linguistic analysis of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a "masterpiece of social consciousness" (Alexander, 1965, p. 11), to show how the generic concept of the main character's development is tackled in the work. The analysis is supposed to be a step towards a better and more systematic understanding of novels in English, especially in academic situations; the role the novel as a realization of language use can play in language teaching and learning should not be undermined.

## Method

*The Grapes of Wrath* is a social epic whose story evolves around a poor Oklahoman family, the Joads, who leave their deserted homeland during the Great Depression of 1930s in hope of finding peace in another place, but this hope changes to a mirage the moment they enter California. The major characters that carry the burden of the story on their shoulders all belong to the lowest class of the American society of the time. The novel has chapters called Interchapters that are narrated by Steinbeck's narrator. There are also chapters in the form of "dialogue and action" (Alexander, 1965, p. 92). The Interchapters inform the reader of the social and economic background of the migrants and prepare the ground for the other chapters. The "dialogue and action" chapters are written in dialogue form with the characters speaking for themselves and revealing their minds, as it were. Peter Lisca, a Steinbeck scholar, points out that Steinbeck uses a variety of styles in *The Grapes of Wrath*, ranging from "biblical language to go-getter talk and conversational narrative in Okie speech" (cited in Fontenrose, 1963, p. 70). We are focusing on the language used in the chapters of "dialogue and action" because we find the concept of non-standard English quite motivating to study and assume that Steinbeck's depiction of a socio-local dialect of English must create a bedrock for his characterization of lower class people, including Tom Joad, who are on the bottom end of the social ladder and their language is often regarded as vile. We want in fact to see how the lower class protagonist's 'vile language' might be affected by his social and intellectual maturation throughout the novel and how Steinbeck tackles the generic

maturation linguistically. To fulfill this, we will examine three extracts from the beginning to the end of the novel: Extract 1 is taken from Chapter 4 (Steinbeck, 1946: p. 22), where Tom has just been released from prison on parole and speaks with Casy about his experiences in jail. Extract 2 is taken from Chapter 26 (Steinbeck, 1946: pp. 340-2), where again Tom speaks with Casy, who explicates the hardship of their situation and the cruelty of employers. Extract 3 comes from Chapter 28 (Steinbeck, 1946, pp. 374-5), where Tom tells Ma Joad that he is going to continue Casy's revolution. The rationale for the selection of the extracts is to examine Tom's behavior at the very beginning of the novel and compare it with his behavior at the end of it while the second extract realizes the effects Casy as an influential intellectual character in the novel might have on Tom's maturation.

Framework

Language, according to Leech and Short (1981), is a multileveled code and three levels of organization can be distinguished for it. These three levels are phonology, syntax, and semantics. Regarding the overall tendency in this study, i.e. the examination of the maturation of a character through his language, the analysis of the extracts on these three levels would be very fruitful. However, because of the spacelimits, we are mainly concerned with the semantic analysis of the extracts, although we are making brief references to the phonological as well as syntactical characteristics of Tom's language to show how his lower class status is established and maintained throughout the novel. We are mainly drawing on Halliday's concept of Transitivity from his Systemic Functional Linguistics to analyze Tom's language for his mind style, the term Fowler(1996) uses to account for a person's particular cognitive view of things and how s/he apprehends and conceptualizes the world.

For Halliday (1971), language as a semantic resource is organized in three basic functions: Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual. From this perspective, language is used to talk about the world, either the external world--things, events, qualities, etc.--or the internal world--thoughts, beliefs, feelings, etc. From the

experiential perspective, language comprises a set of resources for referring to entities in the world and the ways in which those entities act or relate to each other (Thompson, 2004). Experiential function is a sub-category of Ideational function that deals with an individual's experience of the world. One of the possible options available within this function is the Transitivity system which is the Ideational function at Clause rank. Accordingly, there are three semantic categories in Transitivity system of language which explain how the phenomena of the real world are presented as linguistic structures. These are:

1) the Process, which is represented by the verb,
2) the Participant, which refers to the roles of persons and objects,
3) the Circumstance, which is typically the adverbials of time, place, and manner in English.

From an experiential perspective, Processes constitute the core of the Clause; that is, the Clause is primarily about the event or state the Participants are involved in, and the Circumstance is usually realized by adverbial groups or prepositional phrases.

Halliday distinguishes six different Process types, which are presented in the table below (see Halliday, 1988; Eggins, 1994; Thompson, 2004):

According to Thompson (2004, p. 92), "mental processes form a viable semantic category: there are clear differences between something that goes on in the external world and something that goes on in the internal world of the mind; and there are many verbs which refer to these mental processes." Also, the participant involved in Mental Processes is not dealing with actions, but senses.

Table 1.
*Process Types*

| Process Type | Core Meaning | Participants |
|---|---|---|
| Material | Doing, Happening | Actor+ (Goal) + (Range/Scope) + (Beneficiary) |
| Mental | Sensing | Sensor+ Phenomenon |
| Perception | Perceiving | |
| Cognition | Thinking | |
| Emotion | Feeling | |
| Verbal | Saying | Sayer+ (Receiver) + (Verbiage) |
| Relational | Being and Having | Value, Token |
| Identifying | Identifying | Carrier, Attribute |
| Attributing | Attributing | |
| Behavioral | Behaving | Behave+ (Behavior) + (Phenomenon) Existent |
| Existential | Existing | |

Three sub-categories of Mental Processes are distinguished as follows:

1) Emotion or reaction (process of feeling)
2) Cognition (process of deciding, knowing, understanding)
3) Perception (process of seeing, hearing, etc.)

Our assumption is that, among different Process types, Mental Processes seem to play the most outstanding role in the analysis of a character's mind style. Thus it is on the basis of SF Transitivity system and with a special attention to Mental Processes that we are tracing the protagonist's development in the novel.

## Analysis and Discussion

The three selected extracts trace Tom's development in the course of events in the novel. Steinbeck's skillful use of graphological effects reflecting the phonology and dialect of the main characters in

their speeches distinguishes between them and people like Mr. Rawly, a middle class camp manager in Chapter 22. Tom's language comprises elements such as the pronunciation of the final *–ing* reduced to /n/ instead of the standard /ŋ/ that are usually attributed to lower working class people. It is consequently partially on the basis of these elements that Tom's social status is established and maintained in the novel. In Extract 1 from Chapter 4, where Tom speaks with Casy about his experiences in jail, there are forty-four Clauses. They include twenty six Material Processes, eight Mental Processes, and the rest of the Clauses have Existential, Verbal, and Relational Processes. The greater proportion of Material Processes is due to the fact that Tom is mainly speaking about the physical aspects of prison and the experience of some persons leaving the jail and coming back to enjoy its environment because it is harsh and crueloutside. Tombecomes the Sensor of five Mental Processes when he speaks about his own mental experience of leaving the jail and of his fears:

1) 'I guess Granma never read it. '
2) 'Last night, thinking where I am gonna sleep…'
3) 'I got scared. '
4) 'An' I got thinking about my bunk'
5) 'an' I wonder what the stir-bug I got for a cell mate is doin'. '

All these Mental Processes happen in two sentences where Tom gives an account of his own mental experience.

Extract 2 from Chapter 26 (Steinbeck, 1946: pp. 340-2) is again a dialogue between Tom and Casy just before he is killed by a police officer, but this time Casy has just been released from prison and has turned into the leader of a kind of protest and strike against the low wages. In this extract, there are fifty-four Clauses produced by Tom against the one hundred and thirty Clauses produced by Casy. Casy speaks twice more than Tom because he is speaking about his time in prison, and he is informing Tom about what he is going to do and what the aim of the strike is. Tom is the Sensor of three Perception Processes and seven Cognition

Processes. Those Clauses which have a verb of physical perception like seeing and hearing are

6) 'I seen a bunch a fella yellin '.
7) 'Never seen sech a talker. '
8) 'Never seen so many guys with guns. '

The other seven Clauses have Cognitive Processes and, interestingly enough, four of them that are Processes of thinking and understanding contain zero-contemplation:

1) 'I dunno,' Tom said.
2) 'I don' know how. '
3) 'Don' know if they'll even let a fella talk. '
4) 'I don' think they'll swalla that. '

In Extract 2 most of Tom's answers to Casy's long utteraces are 'No '. Those Perception Processes are at the beginning of the dialogue between them where Casy is describing the situation to Tom, and Tom is reacting to what he hears and sees physically.In fact, he has just started to understand but cannot reflect on them mentally so he responds with negative mental verbs to demonstrate his lack of understanding and his uncertainty. Later, in Extract 3 from Chapter 28 (pp. 374-5 in the book), which is selected from Tom's last appearance in the novel and his last conversation with Ma, he reaches a relative state of maturity in his 'mind style.'The number of Mental Clauses in this extract reaches seventeen Clauses against twenty-five Material Clauses. Fourteen Clauses are of Cognition type (thinking, wondering, and knowing) and three are Clauses with Perception Processes. Tom is the Sensor of eight Mental Processes, seven of which are Cognitive. The following are examples from Extract 3:

1) 'I been thinkin' how it was in that gov 'ment camp. '
2) 'I been wonderin ' why we can 't do that all over. '

3)  I been thinkin 'long as I 'm a outlow anyways… '

Although Tom makes use of repeated verbs to express his mental state (like think and wonder), which can be related to his limited range of vocabulary, the number of Clauses with positive Cognitive Processes has increased in the third extract. Table 2 illustrates the number of the Clauses in which Tom is the Sensor of Cognitive Processes and Table 3 compares those Clauses with one another.

Table 2.
*Process Types in Three Extracts*

|  | Material Processes | Mental Processes | Other Process Types | Mental Processes with Tom as Sensor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Extract 1 | 26 | 8 | 10 | 5 |
| Extract 2 | 18 | 14 | 22 | 10(seven cognition) |
| Extract 3 | 25 | 17 | 16 | 8(seven cognition) |

Table 3.
*Tom's Clauses with Cognitive Processes in Three Extracts Compared*

| Extract 1 | Extract 2 | Extract 3 |
|---|---|---|
| •'I guess Granma never Read it.'<br>• 'Last night, thinking where I am gonna sleep…'<br>• 'I got scared. '<br>• 'An' I got thinking about my bunk'<br>• 'An' I wonder what the stir- bug I got for a cell mate doin'. ' | • 'I dunno,'…<br>• 'I don' know how. '<br>• 'Don' know if they'll even let a fella talk. '<br>• 'I don' think they'll swalla that.'<br>• 'I know 'im'.<br>• 'I bet she got twins.' | • 'I been thinkin' how it was in that gov 'ment camp. '<br>• 'I been wonderin' why we can't do that all over.<br>• 'I been thinkin 'long as I 'm a outlow anyways… '<br>• 'I ain't thought it out clear'<br>• 'An' I been wonderin' if all our folks got together'<br>• 'I been thinkin' a hell of a lot'<br>• thinkin' about our people livin' like pigs' |

The number of Perception Processes in Extract 2 is more than those in two other extracts. That is because Tom is still gathering information through his physical senses and he is going to be prepared for the final part of the novel where he undergoes a change in the personality. In Extract 3, he seems to have found his way and he knows what exactly he wants to do since he has had enough time to think and reflect on his situation. Besides this, his language has undergone a syntactic transformation, too. At the beginning of the novel, Tom's Clauses are fairly simple, and he uses non-standard structures to speak about his own problems like eating, sleeping and finding a job in order to earn some money to live on. But in the last extract, we witness a change in syntax: sentences are longer and besides simple conjunctions like *and, or* and *but* he also makes use of subordinated Clauses. Up to the nearly final chapters of the novel Tom is only concerned with his own family's issues and he never thinks about a bigger society, but the night he kills the guard who has killed Casy he starts to see in a better light and he starts to think about more universal issues which wereCasy's main concern. As his anxieties change and as his focus of attention changes to more important issues, his language changes, too. His sentences become longer and he makes use of more subordinating conjunctions like *as long as*, *while*, *when*, *wherever*, and *logical* connectives like *if*. He also adds *or* to his coordinating conjunctives:

> 'If Casyknowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. '
> '…or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hundred thousan' good farmers is starving'.'

Interestingly enough, although his sentences are longer and more complicated with more subordinations and conjunctions, he is still persisting in using ungrammatical and non-standard features which are characteristic of his social class:

> 'He wasn' doing nothin' against the law, Ma.'
> '…they was better order than them cops ever give. '
> '…, while a hundred thousan' good farmers isstarvin'. '
> 'If Casyknowed…'

The evidence from the analysis of the extracts, therefore, shows that Steinbeck's description of Tom Joad as a less complicated working class character is mainlyachieved by the characteristics of his language.The phonology and syntax of his language with special pronunciations and simple clauses referring mostly to physical statesat the beginning of the novel all establish and maintain a character who is an uneducated member of lower social class and concerned only with his own family and immediate contexts.The semantic analysis of an extract from the end of the novel, however, shows an improvement in Tom's character. In Extract 1 and Extract 2, Tom's inner experience of the world around him is simple. The result of the analysis in terms of Process types shows Tom to be engaged in more physical and verbal activities than mental ones and the grammatical structures used by him in these extracts are simple and show no complexity. However, as we move on to Extract 3, which reflects Tom's final appearance in the novel, we realize that Tom's mind style has changed. This is inferable from the more Mental Processes in his language and, although his sentences still contain 'ungrammatical' features, i.e. 'deviations' from Standard English, his grammar turns to be more complicated accordingly. He has eventually turned into a man whose concerns are not confined within the limits of his family bounds any more; he is universal.

## Pedagogical Implications

Teaching and learning English through literature is such a vast area today that we are aware that any claim regarding the implications of this study for the future of the subject might need much further empirical research. Hall (2005) presents a comprehensive study of the aspects of literature in language education and shows how complex the case is. The complexity arises from issues such as relevance, authenticity, type of culture, assessment, level of proficiency, native/non-native English and so on, each of which requires loads of empirical research. According to Hall's study, however, it can be argued that literature has had a role, with its ups and downs, both in education in general and

language education in particular. In both cases, we believe, the dominant approaches of language and literature of different periods have influenced the use of literature in class. If language was taught according to, for example, the principles of 'grammar translation' method, extracts from literary texts would be takento classroom and treated in the same vein. If the approach was a 'humanistic' one, language and literature would be treated accordingly (See Palmer 1965; Doyle 1989; McRae 1991; Kramsch and Kramsch 2000). Widdowson (1975, p. 83) notes that "the study of literature is primarily a study of language use and as such it is not a separate activity from language learning but an aspect of the same activity." On the other hand, it is a fact that literature as a rich realization of language use has not been used exclusively in providing teaching materials for EFL programs. And even when it has been introduced to such programs, it has been tackled unsystematically with negative effects on language learners (for an interesting discussion, see Hall, 2005, for instance). The present study, which was undertaken as a project affiliated to the Applied Linguistics Discipline, was an attempt to treat the novel as a realization of language use with generic characteristics that could be accounted for linguistically. It should be noted that it was carried out in the light of today's general umbrella term in language studies which is 'discourse'. Discourse, from our viewpoint, is a conceptualization of language which radically challenges the traditional distinction between language and literature and brings to fulfillment the notions by scholars such as Widdowson mentioned above. Comments such as those in the following quotes were our source of motivation to carry out this study:

> Our literary universe has expanded into a verbal universe . . . Every teacher of literature should realize that literary experience is only the visible tip of the verbal iceberg: below it is a subliminal area of rhetorical response, addressed by advertising, social assumptions, and casual conversation, that literature as such, on however popular a level of movie or television or comic book, can hardly reach. What confronts

the teacher of literature is the student's whole verbal experience, including this subliterary nine-tenths of it.
    (Frye, quoted in Todorov 1990, p. 11-12)

The study of literature and language could be an opportunity to understand and encourage an even more open and multicultural society (Eaglestone 2000, p. 110).

Why can't we approach literature, culture, and language as naturally intertwined? If we do not integrate civilization, literature and language in a concerted way, we will get only a veneer of language, literary or cultural appreciation (Barnett 1991).

Modern linguistics constituted itself by ignoring questions of history and value . . . where it is a question of the relation of written texts to speech and to other writtentexts, modern linguistics has little to say . . . linguistics does not address our questions . . .[but] the study of language and that of literature are inextricably intertwined . . .
[What is needed] rhetoric, discourse studies . . . intention and the context ofutterance in the analysis of language.
(MacCabe 1984)

A sentence is a unit belonging to language, and to the linguist. A sentence is a combination of possible words, not a concrete utterance . . . Discourse is not made up of sentences, but of uttered sentences, or, more succinctly, of utterances. Now the interpretation of an utterance is determined, on the one hand, by the sentence that is uttered, and on the other hand by the process of enunciation of that sentence. That enunciation process includes a speaker who utters, an addressee to whom the utterance is directed, a time and a place, a discourse that precedes and one that follows, in short, an enunciatory context. (Todorov 1990, p. 16)

With such comments in view, we do not believe that language students should be bewildered any longer with the uncertainty of how to tackle 'literary language', which is used to seem to deviate from 'Standard English'. Literature is a proof that language and its study is a very complex issue and that a more comprehensive knowledge of English language requires that it should be approached as discourse. Such a view of language and its teaching and learning is assumed to broaden the language learner's cross-cultural understanding. Language teaching and learning is no longer a formalistic activity; it is an endeavor to understand one another's meanings and to gain social consciousness. Novels can be a good source for such an endeavor, and discoursal approaches to their analysis and reading could be quite fruitful.

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