

A Functional Stylistics Interpretation of “Losing Out” by Mutaleni Nadimi

Susana Ndapewa Salom, Haileleul Zeleke Woldemariam

Department of Communication and Languages, Namibia University of Science and Technology, Windhoek, Namibia

Email: ndsusansalom@gmail.com, hwoldemariam@nust.na

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Abstract

The paper presents a Functional Stylistics interpretation of a short story “Losing Out” written by a Namibian author Mutaleni Nadimi. The study followed a Systematic Functional Linguistic framework in which it recognises the three metafunctions of language: ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction. These components were used to analyse how the writer used language to create meaning. The study used a content analysis method to gather findings, present and analyse findings. The findings show that Mutaleni has used elements of the three metafunctions of language as per the Functional Linguistic theory. The study concludes that there are many Namibian writers who emerged after independence and their work needs recognition. Literary and linguistic studies should be utilized to encourage contemporary and aspiring writers, as well as readers to understand local literary work.

Keywords

Addressor/Addressee, Coherence, Functional Stylistic, Modification, Systematic Functional Linguistics, Theme/Rheme

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The study employs Halliday’s systematic functional linguistics (SFL) theory to describe and interpret the functions of language in short stories. The short story used in the study is “Losing Out” written by a Namibian author Mutaleni Nadimi; hence, setting a Namibian context in the analysis. The rationale for selecting the short story under interpretation is to diversify indigenous literary work and to embrace local talent as portrayed through different literary platforms. Systematic functional linguistics is one of the traditional linguistic theories developed by

Halliday in the 70s to explain the function of language. Functionalist approaches are fundamentally concerned with the ways in which formal properties of language are used pragmatically. The theory is still relevant to date in many areas of linguistic studies. The short story “Losing Out” sets the point of departure as it is used to investigate and interpret how the writer used three metafunctions of language as per functionalist stylistics. The ideational metafunction is explored and used in the analysis to examine how experiential relations are expressed through transitivity and modification. The ideational functions of language were also used to flesh out the writers’ internal world, such as the reactions and perceptions. The paper continues to show how interpersonal metafunction of language is used to express the mood, attitude and tone in the story. The paper concludes the discussions by exploring textual metafunction with the focus placed on how cohesive devices are used to build coherence.

1.2. Problem Statement

Short story writers usually employ a number of linguistic elements to express meaning in their texts. This is not an exemption for Namibian writers, who often write to show their experiences in a way of passing stories from one generation to another. Short story writers usually use different linguistic elements, for instance, emotions expressed in the story to maintain social status. Language is also used to establish and maintain social relationships through modality. Cohesive devices are used to show the connection between sentences and paragraphs in texts including conjunctions to show continuation. Other linguistic elements such as adjectives are used to modify nouns and create emphasis on the descriptives made. As [Mlambo & Kandemiri \(2015\)](#) rightly put it, stories are also written as the reflection of society and what it stands for. In so doing, writers use language to express themselves; but how do they use the functions of language to create meaning? To understand how authors create meaning in their texts, the paper interrogates the following questions:

- How does the writer use the ideational functions of language through transitivity, modification and coordination in the story?
- How are the interpersonal functions of language used in line with mood, attitude and tone to establish and create relationships?
- How does the writer use textual functions through conjunction and other cohesive devices to form cohesion in the story?

2. Literature Review

2.1. A Review of Namibian Literature

Like most African countries, Namibia has a historical division attached to skin colour and tribal lines. This raises questions about identity in Namibia literature ([Chapman, 1995](#)). Who are to be identified as Namibian writers? Some people are Namibian by birth, while others were perhaps born in other countries and now live in Namibia and yet are committed writers. When it comes to Namibian

literature written in English, it came to the researcher's knowledge that publications are minimal. According to Winterfeldt and Vale (2011), before Namibia's independence, there were few novels or short stories published in English by black Namibians. However, there were a number of literature publications in other languages such as; Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama, as well as Afrikaans. This shows that, before independence in 1990, Namibia had a collection of literature that is reflective and in sync with its historical occupations (Ntinda, 2020). All in all, a collection of literature found in Namibia from pre-independence dispensation is in German, Afrikaans and a considerable few, in English.

Considering that most of literature publications by Namibian are mostly autobiographies, this shows why many writers chose to write in their vernacular languages rather than writing in English. Most literature in indigenous languages consists of traditional tales, short stories and novels which are mostly written for school children. It is common practice globally, that views expressed in a vernacular language have the greatest persuasion effect on the users of that language (Ntinda, 2020). For instance, there are critical issues expressed more persuasively in Oshindonga than in English which is Namibia's second language.

Some of the literary texts written by Namibians after independence are "Making a Difference" by Libertina Amadhila and "The Jungle Fighter" by Pieter Ekandjo both authors are Namibian freedom fighters who went into exile and therefore shared their stories and experiences of the liberation struggle (Lenga & Woldemariam, 2020). Namibian Literature by black writers is mostly dominated by the events that led up to the liberation struggle of the country. Authors penned events and the happenings as a way of retracing the past through a nonviolent manner. Winterfeldt and Vale (2011) contended that many of the Namibian writers who emerged with independence, focused on merging of a "story" with "history" into what they called a "fictionalized biography" (Lenga & Woldemariam, 2020). Much of this is evident from the many texts by Namibian writers since the publication of the novel by Joseph Diescho titled *Born of the sun*. There are also other Namibian authors such as John ya Otto who wrote *Battlefront Namibia*.

There is a collection of short stories written by Namibians after independence, for instance the common short story by Kaleni Hiyalwa "Let this not be True" (published in "Coming on Strong" edited by Margie Orford and Nepeti Nicanor in 1996. *Coming on strong* is a collection of short stories written by Namibian women who shared their experiences of colonialism either in Namibia or in exile prior independence. Another prominent short story in a Namibian literary collection is "Bullies, Beast and Beauties", also written after independence in 2010. Kavevangua Kahengua, another short story writer wrote "The Future Needs Education and Other Short Stories" published in 2013. Some recent short stories are published online, for instance, the "Losing Out" the story under study is written by Nadimi, a Namibian writer and it was published on "Doek", a Namibian online magazine consisting of literary work produced by Namibians. Doek has a collection of short stories, poetry, non-fictions and videos. The magazine promotes the participation of Namibian authors who are aspiring to improve their writing skills and share

their literary work with an online community, thereby embracing technology.

2.2. A Review of Research Articles

Systematic functional linguistics is one of the traditional approaches to the study of linguistics. It was developed by Halliday (1978) as he also enlightens that systematic functional linguistic recognises that each literary work has a social function; This means that any literary work has value. According to functionalism, language has three semantic metafunctions, namely the ideational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction and the textual metafunction. Eggin (2004) emphasised functionalist approaches are fundamentally concerned with the ways in which formal properties of language are used pragmatically. Therefore, under systematic functional linguistics approach, the focus is on the text itself.

As indicated earlier, Halliday developed the idea that language has three primary roles or functions which interest to make meaning (Halliday, 1978). The example “Susan ate a sweet mango” has three interrelated functions. It has a message, which is the information about Susan and her action. The example also has an exchange or a transaction between a writer and a reader or speaker and listener, and it is a means of representation a construal of some process in ongoing human experience. Therefore, a linguistic analysis of a text involves the explanation of the process whereby the particular meanings of the text are made in the linguistic system and aims at explaining the interpretation and evaluation that are put upon that text because “the role of linguistics is to say how and why the text means what it does to the reader or listener, and how and why he evaluates it in a certain way.” (Halliday, 1985). “the categories and methods of linguistics enable critics to focus not on the meanings of work and its implications or value but on the structures that produce meaning” during text generation (Halliday, 1974).

The three interconnecting functions of language are: ideational; whereby language is used to express ideas and experience as represented in a clause; interpersonal function mediates in the establishment of social relationships and the textual function provides the formal properties of a language. It is evident that systematic functional linguistics provides the useful framework that views language as a tool for making meaning. The three metafunctions of language have been utilised by other researchers to analyse literary work from a linguistic perspective. One of the recent linguistic studies done by a Namibian linguist Ntinda (2020) shows how she used all three metafunctions to analyse two autobiographies Amadhilas’ Making a Difference and Ekandjos’ The Jungle Fighter.

2.2.1. Ideational Function

According to Downing & Locke (Cited in Ntinda, 2020) “the ideational metafunction permits one to encode, both semantically and syntactically, people’s mental picture of the physical world and the world of people’s imagination” (p. 11). This shows that ideation talk meaning is about what one experiences in the language. When analysing a text under ideational function, it is imperative to consider the content (text itself) as well as the context in which meaning is created as to

critically ask yourself a question: who does what to who and under what circumstances? This brings us to an important concept under ideation function, which is a concept of transitivity. Analysing texts by transitivity requires one to recognise transitive verbs in clauses or sentences. For instance, “she killed a cat”. The sentence consists of the doer “she” the action “killed” and the receiver of the action or the subject “the cat”. According to Banks (2002), transitivity is a major component of ideational metafunction. Hence, the researcher relies on the concept of transitivity in the analysis of “Losing Out”. To express logical relations, the writer uses coordination apposition and modification to create and communicate the meaning. Halliday (1974) proposed that the logical relations consist of elements of logical function of language. This means, the logical relation analysis focuses on the logical functions of language. In this study, the researcher uses modification as one of the three elements of logical function of language. Henceforth, the analysis shows how the writer employed an ideational metafunction through modification to communicate meaning. Modifiers are usually adjectives or adverbs which are added to the nouns and to the verbs or other adverbs respectively to change the meaning of the nouns or verbs.

2.2.2. Interpersonal Metafunction

The interpersonal metafunction proposes how language is used to establish and create relationships. According to Tangkas (2015) the interpersonal metafunction is an interesting phenomenon to for investigation. It is used to uncover the speech functions and moods in a spoken or written language. It is the function of language to participate in communicative acts with another person, to take on the role and express and understand the feelings, attitudes and judgments. Analysing texts through interpersonal metafunction can be done by identifying the pronouns used by the writer, for instance, I, you, she/he/it. In interpersonal metafunction, the addressor/addressee relationship is important. Ntinda (2020) identifies modality as a key exponent of the interpersonal metafunction, refers to a “speaker”’s attitude towards, or opinion about, the truth of a proposition expressed by a sentence and extends to their attitude towards the situation or event described by a sentence. “The concept of ‘attitude’ is central to modality” (Fowler 1996: p. 168). A linguistic analyst should then identify the writer’s use of mood, such as the use of words such as can, could, should, would, etc.

2.2.3. Textual Metafunction

The textual metafunction is concerned with text formation and instrumental in the realization of the ideational and the interpersonal functions in a text. As explained by Halliday (1985) “It is through this function that language makes links with itself and with the situation; and discourse becomes possible, because the speaker or writer can produce a text and the listener or the reader can recognize one” (p. 92). According to Banks (2002), the textual metafunction is that part of the meaning potential which makes a text into a text, as opposed to a simple string of words or clauses, thus involves phenomena such as thematic structure, information

structure, and cohesion (Ntinda, 2020). The concept of “cohesion” is an important part of textual metafunction. A text is coherent if its constituent parts are meaningfully related so that the text as a whole makes sense. Fonteyn (2004) specifies that the theme is a significant carrier of the relevance of a sentence to the previous one and this is about coherence. To emphasise coherence, the sentences should be related in some way and a paragraph should have unity.

3. Major Findings and Discussions

The findings are analysed and interpreted based on the three functions of language as per functional stylistics approach, therefore these functions form the subtopics for discussions.

3.1. Ideational Metafunction

The following sentences show how Nadimi implemented modification function to create meaning in the story.

- 1) “The **saddest** thing about having parents is being sure they’re going to die.”
- 2) “What happens to **elderly** men is this: they get all quiet and shut up inside.”
- 3) “They stare vacantly at their hands and stop engaging in **free** conversation.”
- 4) “A **certain** knowingness exists between you and the person whose body incubated you and birthed you to life.”
- 5) “It was the most time and **undivided** attention we got from him.”
- 6) “He would feed us all his **best** parenting in that fifteen minute ride.”
- 7) “He wore a cap over his uncombed hair and a **grizzly** morning beard.”
- 8) “He once suggested, after seeing me frantically waving to my **best** friend...”
- 9) “The **last** time I spoke alone with my father was on a walk we took from my house to a nearby shop.”
- 10) “It was just the two of us, the **tall**, swaying trees, the low, rumbling roar of the traffic on the main road, and the syncopated rhythm of our steps on the **dusty** pavement.”
- 11) “I instinctively smiled as he paid me his **usual** compliment of having beautiful, **slender** fingers.”
- 12) “We, each with a **small** bag of groceries in one hand, walked back to my home with **joyful**, **long** strides, the quieting rush of **early** evening traffic washing over us.”
- 13) “Their **weary** eyes, still lips, and fine leathered skin tell tales of battles lost and storms braved.”
- 14) “Even if the only jewels I wear are the ones my father imagined for me, and the paint is **merely** stains from the kitchen.”
- 15) “So it is expected, at the end of life, that one lets go of life’s **hard** duties.”
- 16) “It was an exceptionally **quiet** day.”
- 17) “It had rained that morning and the smell of wet earth was a **cold** blanket to our **stunned** emotions.”
- 18) “The cars sounded different on the **wet** and **empty** tarred roads.”

19) “The city’s atmosphere was insulated by a cool, **stark** mood.”

20) “As a **strange** homage, the rest of us adopted my father’s **silent** expression.”

As it appears from the above 20 sentences, it shows that the author relied more on modification with the use of adjectives to modify the noun or pronoun. In all the sentences, the author employed pre modifiers to express his reactions and perception. For instance, the adjective “saddest”, was used to indicate that there was nothing else that could cause Nadimi more sadness than the thought of knowing that her parents are going to die. Modifiers were also used to give extra information about the nouns.

Other modifiers

1) “Especially if they get **properly** old...”

2) “I worried my father was getting old too **quickly**—all of a sudden.”

3) “He **once** suggested, after seeing me **frantically** waving to my best friend...”

4) “He was **unusually** chatty.”

5) “I **instinctively** smiled as he paid me his usual compliment of having beautiful, slender fingers.”

6) “It was an **exceptionally** quiet day.”

In the six sentences, Nadimi uses modifiers which are adverbs used to modify a verb or an adjective. Modifiers used in sentences 1 to 5 are used to give extra meaning as to what degree, how much or how the action was done. In the last sentence, the modifier “exceptionally” was used to modify the adjective “quiet” as to show that the day that Nadimi’s father died was not to be compared to any other day.

3.2. Interpersonal Metafunction

It is pointed out in the literature review that the interpersonal metafunction of language is used to establish and maintain relationships, hence, the importance of addressor/addressee relationship. In the story “Losing Out” one sees how the writer uses language to express her relationship with her parents. First of all, the title speaks volume. “Losing Out” means losing her parent(s) from death is a big loss.

3.2.1. Modal Verbs

1) “My father **would** drive us to school early in the morning.”

2) “He **would** feed us all his best parenting in that fifteen-minute ride.”

3) “...he wished we **could** teleport ourselves over into their car...”

The 3 sentences above represent the interpersonal metafunction of language in line with modality. In the first and second sentences, the writer used the modal verb “would” to indicate her father’s responsibility of taking the children to school, as well as the responsibility of parenting. Which means the father could speak to his children, for instance guide them about life issues. The use of “could” in the third sentence shows that there was no possibility for the father in taking action of what he wished to do. Frankly, he could not throw his daughter out of the car

into another car where the daughter’s best friend was.

3.2.2. The Use of Pronouns

The pronoun that dominates the whole story is “I” which Nadimi used to refer to herself. The other pronoun used is “he” to refer to his father. “We” or “us” pronouns are used in the story to refer to either Nadimi and her father, Nadimi and her siblings or both Nadimi, her father and the siblings.

3.3. Textual Metafunction

In the extracts below, the writer used of theme and rheme in the short story to form cohesion.

1) Extract 1

“He wore a cap over his uncombed hair and a grizzly morning beard. He didn’t bother to get dressed properly just yet, with a tracksuit top over his button-down, brushed cotton pyjamas. He once suggested, after seeing me frantically waving to my best friend in the car driving next to ours, that he wished we could teleport ourselves over into their car...”

Theme	Rheme
He	wore a cap over his uncombed hair and a grizzly morning beard.
He	didn’t bother to get dressed properly just yet...
He	once suggested, after seeing me frantically waving to my best friend in the car driving next to ours,
That he	wished we could teleport ourselves over into their car...

2) Extract 2

“I had heard the story many times before. I let him speak and feigned surprise at the plot twist I knew was coming. I loved my father’s stories.”

Theme	Rheme
I	had heard the story many times before.
I	Let him speak and feigned surprise at the plot twist
I	Knew was coming.
I	Lod my father’s stories.

Extract 1

T1-----R1
 T1-----R2
 T1-----R3
 T1-----R4

Extract 2

T1-----R1
 T1-----R2
 T1-----R3
 T1-----R4

In the two extracts from her story, Nadimi uses constant themes (parallel progression thematic patterns) in the paragraphs. In the first extract, she uses the

theme “my father” as repeatedly used in all clauses represented by the pronoun “he”. In the second extract, the theme “I” was also used repeatedly in the clauses as she referred to herself by using the first persona or pronoun “I” in four clauses. This indicates that Nadimi uses parallel progression thematic pattern in his short story.

3) Coherence

The cohesive devices used by the writer are presented as they appear in the following extract.

“He once suggested, after seeing me frantically waving to my best friend in the car driving next to ours, that he wished we could teleport ourselves over into their car and save him the trouble of having to drive all the way to our school and haggle his car out of the congested parking lot.”

In the extract above, it is shown that Nadimi uses the conjunctions after, that as well as and to connect the events or show the sequence of events. The conjunction “after” was used to connect the first and second clause which is the suggestion that the father made was caused by Nadimi’s action when she waved at her best friend. This shows a cause and effect in the arrangement of events. The conjunction “that” was used in a reporting form to specify the suggestion that her father made. The first “and” connects two clauses to show that if Nadimi’s father could teleport her into her best friend’s car, he would not have to drive to school. The last “and” in the extract connects the two troubles the father could be saved from, which are driving to school and struggling to get his car out of the congested parking lot.

4. Conclusion

Systematic Functional Linguistics theory was developed by Halliday. The study concludes that although Systematic Functional Linguistics is a traditional theory that explains the functions of language, the theory is still relevant in contemporary linguistic studies. Linguistic scholars are able to utilize it in their interpretation of how its metafunctions are used by writers to create meaning. In the study, a short story by Mutaleni Nadimi was used to analyse how language is used by contemporary Namibian short story writers to create meaning in their texts. The research relied more on the textual metafunction of language through the recognition of modification, themes and rhemes. The other metafunctions, interpersonal and ideational metafunctions were also explored.

5. Recommendations

As Namibian writers are emerging after the country’s independence, it is imperative that local studies in literature and linguistics make use of indigenous literary work. This will appetize the interest of writers to continue participating and contributing to a collection of literature in general. The recognition of Namibian writers’ literature and linguistic work will also empower readers when they can easily understand and interpret these texts. Upon the completion of the study, it surfaced

that the theory utilized is indeed broader, hence, some of its aspects could not be explored. The study recommends that further analysis of short stories focusing on only one metafunction of language could be another study of interest.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Annexure

Losing Out

The saddest thing about having parents is being sure they're going to die. Grandparents are so much easier to lose. Especially if they get properly old—the two degrees of generation dividing you from them makes it easier. I worried my father was getting old too quickly—all of a sudden.

What happens to elderly men is this: they get all quiet and shut up inside. They stare vacantly at their hands and stop engaging in free conversation. You have to ask them questions and then hope for an answer. Otherwise, get used to silence from your father.

Why does this happen?

Mothers are creatures with whom we can be frank. Affections are easily expressed. Embraces are met. A certain knowingness exists between you and the person whose body incubated you and birthed you to life.

The traffic gave off ocean sounds, waves of cars washing up and speeding off in a rushed, hushed, and hypnotic rhythm. I thought back to my school days. My father would drive us to school early in the morning. It was the most time and undivided attention we got from him. He would feed us all his best parenting in that fifteen minute ride. Classical music and life advice. He wore a cap over his uncombed hair and a grizzly morning beard. He didn't bother to get dressed properly just yet, with a tracksuit top over his button-down, brushed cotton pyjamas. He once suggested, after seeing me frantically waving to my best friend in the car driving next to ours, that he wished we could teleport ourselves over into their car and save him the trouble of having to drive all the way to our school and haggle his car out of the congested parking lot.

The last time I spoke alone with my father was on a walk we took from my house to a nearby shop. He was unusually chatty. No book, remote control, mobile phone, grandchild, or very important visitor disturbed our conversation. It was just the two of us, the tall, swaying trees, the low, rumbling roar of the traffic on the main road, and the syncopated rhythm of our steps on the dusty pavement. My walking speed had overtaken his over the years and so he walked with a bounce in his step as he retold me some story about when he had first moved to the city. I had heard the story many times before. I let him speak and feigned surprise at the plot twist I knew was coming.

I loved my father's stories.

We bought the fruit and yoghurt we were on errand for and he paid for it all although it was intended for my kitchen. On the way back, he took my left hand and compared it to his. He had done this many times before. I instinctively smiled as he paid me his usual compliment of having beautiful, slender fingers. We, each with a small bag of groceries in one hand, walked back to my home with joyful, long strides, the quieting rush of early evening traffic washing over us.

When I remember my father's face I understand why he no longer had to say too much. Men's lives are written on their faces. Their weary eyes, still lips, and

fine leathered skin tell tales of battles lost and storms braved.

Women's lives are written on our hands. The battle lines of nurturing—of cooking, washing, and healing—are at home on jewelled fingers crowned with painted nails. Even if the only jewels I wear are the ones my father imagined for me, and the paint is merely stains from the kitchen. I understand that men speak and women do. So it is expected, at the end of life, that one lets go of life's hard duties.

My father died on a Sunday in December. It was an exceptionally quiet day. It had rained that morning and the smell of wet earth was a cold blanket to our stunned emotions. The cars sounded different on the wet and empty tarred roads. The city's atmosphere was insulated by a cool, stark mood.

There was not much to be said.

My mother wailed. As a strange homage, the rest of us adopted my father's silent expression.

The storyteller, the absent father, the warrior had gone to rest.

Mutaleni Nadimi.

Retrieved from: Doek!—A literary magazine from Namibia.
(<https://doeklitmag.com/>).