

# An Application of Systemic and Functional Linguistics to the Teaching of English Transferred Epithet\*

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**Abstract**—In view of the problems existing in the teaching of English transferred epithet, the relevant theories of systemic functional linguistics are introduced to explain them. The paper clarifies the difference between transferred epithet and personification resorting on the thought of linguistic hierarchy, expands the scope of traditional transferred epithet, and points out that transferred epithet has not only ideational function but also interpersonal function according to linguistic functions. Meanwhile, referring to the theory of grammatical metaphor, the paraphrase of epithet transferred is to recover its congruent form in nature.

**Keywords**—Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL); transferred epithet; transferred word; grammatical metaphor introduction

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the support of various schools of linguistics, English teaching has made great progress in recent years, but there are still some problems in figures of speech teaching. This paper intends to discuss the problems existing in the teaching of transferred epithet, a rhetoric device. Generally speaking, there are two problems concerned: one is the distinction between transferred epithet and personification, and the other is the understanding and interpretation of the former. Systemic functional linguistics is an applied linguistic theory, which has been widely applied to all aspects of foreign language teaching and has shown convincing teaching results. Therefore, this paper aims to apply some aspects of systemic functional linguistics to the teaching of English transferred.

## II. DIFFERENTIATION OF TRANSFERRED EPITHET

There are dozens of figures of speech in English, each of which has its own definition. Transferred Epithet is generally regarded as a rhetorical device in which a word, originally used to describe the characteristics of one thing, is transferred to temporarily modifies another [1]<sup>P.1</sup>, or as a

rhetorical device where a word relating quality is transferred from its normal collocation with a noun to other nouns which are supposed not to be modified by it [2]<sup>P.4</sup>. Usually most of the transferred words are adjectives, so this figure of speech is also termed as “transferred adjective” [3]<sup>P.40</sup>. Although the definition of transferred epithet seems to have clearly told people what it is, in practical analysis, there often encounter some situations where it is hard to decide whether transferred epithet is used. The situations are mainly concerned two aspects.

First, transferred epithet is confused with personification. The following sentence is taken as an example:

(1) The angry sea was continuously tossing their boat.

Many people think that the noun phrase “angry sea” in Example (1) belongs to transferred epithet, because “angry” is usually used as an adjective describing human’s characteristics, but for the present it is transferred to another noun “sea” serving as its premodifier. But in fact, this case belongs to personification. Generally personification is to treat a thing, an object, or idea etc. as if it were human man which has human qualities and emotion, and also can perform the action of human being. In Example, the inanimate thing “sea” is endowed with the human’s quality of being “angry”, such a description gives readers a vivid picture in which the waves ran so high as if it could destroy the boat. Obviously the definition of personification is based on meaning.

Systemic functional linguistics (hence SFL) holds that language is a multi-level system consisting of four levels: semantics, lexical-grammar, phonetics and orthography. From top to bottom, the relationship between levels is realization, that is, the semantic layer is realized by lexical grammar layer, the lexical-grammar layer by phonetics, and the phonetics in turn by orthography[4]<sup>P.46</sup>. As far as the relationship between semantic level and lexical grammar level is concerned, it is not a one-to-one relationship, but a one-to-many relationship, that is, the same meaning can be realized by different lexical grammars. Conversely, the same lexical-grammar can express different meanings. According to the principle that the meaning is embodied by form, personification can be represented by different forms, and

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adjective is only one of them. Other ways are adverbs, verbs and nouns.

(2) The clock on the wall ticked loudly and **lazily**.

(3) The front garden was a gravel square; four evergreen shrubs stood at each corner, where they **struggled to survive** the dust and fumes from a busy main road.

(4) This machine is the **ancestor** of the modern computer.

(5) A mile out to sea, the old lighthouse stood on a stone platform on the rocks, which were being **greedily licked** by the waves.

Of all the above examples, the non-human things are described as human beings and given human attributes or performing certain human actions which can be well illustrated by “lazily”, “struggle to survive”, “ancestor” and “greedily licked” respectively. In example (2), the adverb “lazily” is usually used to describe people as “procrastination, inactivity”, but in this case, the ticking of clock is described by it to highlight its slowness. In example (3), shrubs grow in the dust and fumes as if they “struggled to survive” in such an environment. In example (4), the machine is compared to the “ancestor” of the modern computer to show the machine is the early form of modern computer. In example (5), the rocks were violently lapping against by the waves as if they were “greedily licked” by the latter.

Secondly, the category of transferred epithet is understood in a narrow sense.

Traditionally, it is believed that only the noun phrases produced by the transference are transferred epithet. Therefore, many people think that this figure of speech is represented by the structure of “adjective + noun” in which a noun follows adjective with the symbol “+” indicating they are arranged in a sequential order. In their opinion, only such phenomena of noun phrases as “sleepless night”, “happy tears” and “impatient fingers” etc. belong to transferred epithet. As a result, other linguistic expressions or forms arising from transference are excluded from the category. In my opinion, when it comes to the definition and identification of transferred epithet, there are two key points to grasp of which one is if there involves the transference of word, the other is if the transferred word originally refers to quality. Qualities are on the semantic level of language and on the lexical-grammar level they are typically realized by adjectives. It is this universal understanding that makes people usually confine their transferred epithet to noun phrases which contain adjectives and ignore other linguistic forms. In fact, adverbs can also express qualities, because many adverbs in English derive from adjectives [5]<sup>p.117</sup>. As a consequence, the collocations of adverbs with other linguistic expressions which result from the transference of words also belong to the category of transferred epithet. Generally speaking, there are verbs and adjectives which can be collocated with adverbs, producing verb phrases and adjective phrases respectively. Therefore, transferred epithet includes not only noun phrases, but also verb phrases and adjective phrases.

(6) As the Robemaker’s shadow **fell blackly** across the floor, Fenella ducked behind the nearest rack.

In example (6), the verb phrase “fell blackly” is a case of transferred epithet. With a careful example the whole sentence in which this figure of speech takes place, we can be certain that the original form of the adverb “blackly” is “black” and is employed to function as the premodifier of the noun “shadow” in the noun phrase “black shadow”. But once it is transferred to modify the verb “fell”, it is converted into “blackly” out of the grammatical requirement that only adverbs can serve as the modifier of verb.

(7) When a pet becomes **incurably sick**, the vet will administer euthanasia and arrange for cremation.

In this case, the collocation of the word “incurably” with the word “ill” is obviously not a common one. With a reference of the context, we can infer that “incurably” is transferred from its normal collocation which may mean that “a pet becomes so sick that it could be incurable”. In other words, before the transference, the adverb “incurably” appears as an adjective “incurable”, collocated with the noun “a pet”. But after the transference, it collocates with the adjective ill. Because English grammar stipulates that the modifiers of adjective should be adverbs, “incurable” is changed into “incurably” by adding a “ly” suffix.

### III. UNDERSTANDING AND PARAPHRASE OF TRANSFERRED EPITHET

As an unconventional linguistic phenomenon, transferred epithet is difficult to understand and takes a lot of effort. At the same time, paraphrase can only be done on the basis of understanding. Generally speaking, the understanding of transferred epithet involves two aspects: the ideational and interpersonal meanings. Systemic functional linguistics holds that ideational meaning is the function of language to express the objective world and human psychological world, while the latter is to express the speaker’s subjective feelings, attitudes [6][7]. Paraphrase means the interpretation explanation of meaning in one’s own words, which is an important ability that English learners must master in addition to listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation abilities. The paraphrase of transferred epithet essentially is to restore the expression before the transference is made. Comparatively speaking, transferred epithet is an indirect way of expressing meaning and its paraphrase is a direct easy. In this sense, the restored expression is the congruent form, while transferred epithet is the incongruent one, which is also termed metaphorical expression by using SFL terms. Therefore, transferred epithet belongs to the phenomenon of “grammatical metaphor”. Accordingly, the paraphrase of transferred epithet is to restore its congruent form.

(8) “They’re quite all right,” he murmured, placing a **reassuring arm** about her trembling shoulders. “The twins are quite safe.”

Arm is one part of the body. It does not have the ability to act independently and must be controlled by the brain. Therefore, it is impossible to perform the conduct of

“reassuring” others. For example (8), the agent or doer of the “reassuring” act is “he” who tries to comfort her by “placing his arm on her trembling shoulder”. Therefore, before the word “reassuring” is transferred, it expresses an act which actually is related to the process, one of the ideational functions of language. While after the transference is made, it becomes the premodifier of the word arm, serving as the classifier, another ideational function, to indicate this arm is different other arms as it possesses the quality of reassuring people. We could represent its congruent form as follows:

(8’) “They’re quite all right,” he murmured, placing an arm about her trembling shoulders to **reassuring her**. “The twins are quite safe.”

Unlike Example (8), the phenomenon of transferred epithet in Example (9) is also represented by noun phrases, but before the transference, the transferred word is a noun, rather than a verb.

(9) Tom threw on both brakes impatiently, and we slid to an abrupt **dusty stop** under Wilson’s sign.

In this case, the word “dusty” means “relating to dust” and conventionally represents the characteristics of things, such as “dusty trees” or “dusty streets”. Although the word “stop” appears as a noun, it denotes action [8] which can be proved by its other premodifier “abrupt”. Thus, “dusty stop” is not a conventional collocation, and its premodifier “dusty” has been transferred from other places. Specifically, this word comes from the noun “dust” in the prepositional phrase “in dust”. Or in other word, before its transference, the word “dusty” expresses the ideational meaning to specify in what environment the action of slid happened. Accordingly example (9) can be paraphrased as:

(9’) Tom threw on both brakes impatiently, and we slid to an abrupt stop in dust under Wilson’s sign.

The above two examples are mainly related to the ideational functions of transferred epithet, while the following examples are concerned with interpersonal function, specifically, with appraisal function. This is a subtype of interpersonal function the development of which is attributed to Martin, White and other scholars. This function includes three aspects, namely attitude, gradation and engagement. Attitude function is the speaker’s subjective evaluation of human psychology, behavior and all aspects of things; engagement is related to the source of positions, attitudes and stances, indicating whether the speaker intervenes in the situation and assumes responsibility; and the gradation is to strengthen or weaken the intensity or degree. Transferred epithet often has two appraisal functions at the same time. Take the following sentences as an example:

(10) Vegetables grown near city centres, particularly lettuce, cabbage, spinach and parsley, contain **dangerously high** levels of lead.

In this case, the word “dangerously” has the function of gradation which is quite obvious, suggesting that vegetables grown around the city centre contain very high levels of lead. Moreover, because of the high lead, the vegetables have

become harmful to human body. In this sense, “dangerously” is also a negative evaluation of the vegetables, which indicates that they are not suitable for consumption and harmful to human health or life. Therefore, it belongs to the evaluation from the aspect of value and has the function of appreciation, a subcategory of attitude. We could recover its congruent form as the following one:

(10’) Vegetables grown near city centres, particularly lettuce, cabbage, spinach and parsley, contain **so high** levels of lead that they are dangerous. (J35)

The following example also conveys two appraisal functions of which one is attitude and the other is engagement.

(11) He was left outside in the **pitiless cold**.

In this case, the adjective “pitiless” is a negative evaluation of the person who put him in the cold before the transference in spite of the fact this particular person is not mentioned explicitly, showing that the person is ruthless and expressing the function of attitude. However, after the transference, the words “pitiless” and “cold” form a noun phrase with the former becoming the pre-modifiers of the latter. Generally speaking, the pre-modifiers in noun phrases represent the features of the noun which is the head of the whole phrase. Therefore “pitiless”, which typically is related to human’s quality, has naturally become an attribute of “cold”, expressing ideational meaning. In this sense, this quality has little to do with the person who left him in the cold. In other words, with transference, the speaker blurs the target of the evaluation conveyed by “pitiless”, shifts his responsibility for the negative evaluation of the person concerned, and reduces the degree of intervention in the above sentence [9]. Therefore, the transference also has interpersonal function, to be specific, the engagement function, and a subtype of interpersonal functions. Its congruent form can be expressed as follows:

(11’) pitilessly he was left outside in the cold.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Transferred epithet is an important figure of speech in English, which should be paid attention to in English teaching. However, in traditional foreign language teaching, there are still some unsatisfactory aspects of it, such as the distinction between transferred epithet and personification, the narrow definition of it, the understanding and paraphrase of it, etc. Based on the hierarchy theory of systemic functional linguistics, this paper clarifies the distinction between transferred epithet and personification, and expands the scope of transferred epithet. That is to say, this figure of speech includes not only noun phrases in traditional teaching, but also verb phrases and adjective phrases. At the same time, according to the function view of systemic functional linguistics, transferred epithet, which results from transference of words, often has two functions, either two different ideational functions, or two different interpersonal functions, or combines both ideational functions and interpersonal functions. In addition, with a reference to grammatical metaphor, transferred epithet belongs to the

phenomenon of grammatical metaphor [10]. Its understanding and paraphrase lies in restoring the congruent form before its transference.

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