



Role-Structure Analysis of the “Ant Episode” in Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms: A Pedagogical Suggestion for the Literature Classroom

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The language of Hemingway’s works has been widely noted for its deliberate simplicity and honesty. Like most great writers, Hemingway leaves his message implicit; unlike others, his prose consists of laconic statements and coordinating structures. Hemingway’s artistic approach, critics agree, lies in the intense relationship between sentence structure and meaning. Such stylistic sophistication, however, is often overlooked by inexperienced readers as being casual and unpolished. How can we present this element of style? I would like to explain a linguistic approach, using a widely known Hemingway passage as an example.

A Case Grammar Approach

Over the decades, literary critics have explicated Hemingway’s themes through analyzing the relationship of his characters. One way to better engage our students with Hemingway’s highly stylized prose is to examine not just what his outlook of the world is, but also how he conveys it to the reader.

In Linguistics for Students of Literature, Elizabeth C. Traugott and Mary L. Pratt argue that case grammar (developed primarily by Charles

Fillmore) suggests “exciting ways” of expounding the “world-view” of literary works through a systematic examination of the relationship between sentence structure and meaning (191). In case grammar, a sentence consists of two parts—the “Presentence” and the “Predication.” The Presentence specifies the tense of the Predication, and indicates the different ways in which the Predication can be negated, questioned, or otherwise modified. The Predication consists of a verb and various arguments, which are noun phrases (NP) functioning in different ways. In addition, NPs are regarded as “roles” relative to the predicate. Consider this sentence as an example: “I finished my paper with a computer.” Some of the frequent “role types” in language are AGENT as the doer (such as “I” in the example), INSTRUMENT as the means by which something is done (“with a computer”), and PATIENT as the thing being affected by the action or present in it (“my paper”). Traugott and Pratt suggest a total of less than 20 role types (191-97). In expressing a particular world view, writers (consciously or not) consistently choose particular kinds of role structures over others. When

teachers discuss style and theme in a literature class, the case grammar perspective can translate into an interesting springboard for ideas.

An Example from *A Farewell to Arms*

A Farewell to Arms tells the story of a tragic love affair of a wounded American lieutenant and his British nurse. He deserts the army and flees with his lover to Switzerland. The brief episode of the ill-fated couple ends when the woman dies in childbirth. One of the powerful scenes in the novel depicts an indifferent man watching ants swarming and dying in the fire. Critics have generally interpreted this passage as Hemingway's attempt to relate the futility of individual human experience to both nature and the protagonist himself. However, from a role structure analysis, the scene suggests a fatalistic perspective of the world, an even stronger message than the absurdity of life.

In the following textual examination, I will note all key role types, which explain how sentences (or holistically the episode as a composite of sentences) come to mean in certain ways. I will first label the key phrases as role types, sort out the results, and then account for their relationships. Although the role types identified include more than the AGENT, PATIENT, and INSTRUMENT, readers will quickly find that the many different types are self explanatory. The key phrases to be examined are underscored, with the role types labeled in capital letters:

LOCATION	AGENT
Once in a camp	I put
PATIENT	GOAL
a log	on top of the fire
POSSESSOR	PATIENT
it	was full of ants.

As

PATIENT/EXPERIENCER	AGENT	
it commenced to burn,	the ants	
swarmed out and went first		
GOAL	GOAL PATIENT	
toward the centre	where, the fire	
was; then turned back and ran		
GOAL		
towards the end. When there were		
LOCATION AGENT/PATIENT		
enough on the end	they fell	
GOAL	AGENT	
off into the fire.	Some got out,	
PATIENT/EXPERIENCER		
their bodies	burnt and flattened, and	
GOAL		
went off not knowing where		
AGENT	AGENT	
they were going.	But, most of them	
GOAL		
went toward the fire and then back		
GOAL		
toward the end and then swarmed		
LOCATION		
on the cool end and finally fell off		
GOAL	AGENT	
into the fire.	I remember	
PATIENT	TIME	
thinking	at the time that it was	
TIME		
the end of the world and		
TIME	PATIENT	
a splendid chance	to be a messiah and	
PATIENT	PATH	
lift the log	off the fire	and throw
PATIENT	GOAL	AGENT
it out	where	the ants
GOAL	AGENT	
could get off onto the ground.	But I did	
PATIENT		
not do anything but throw		
PATIENT	GOAL	
a tin cup of water	on the log, so that	
AGENT	PATIENT/AGENT	
I would have the cup empty to put		

PATIENT	AGENT	PATIENT
whisky in before I added water		
GOAL EXPERIENCER	PATIENT	
to it. I think the cup of water		
LOCATION		
on the burning log	only steamed	
PATIENT		
the ants.		

Data Analysis

In the 29 clauses (main, subordinate, and coordinate) cited in the excerpt, only "I" and "the ants" are possible AGENTS because they are animates which might function as doers of action. Since role analysis also explores relationships among AGENT, EXPERIENCER, and PATIENT, a summary of these roles and their frequencies of appearance should reflect the writer's choice of phrase structures and thus, according to case grammarians, a certain perspective of the world.

Number	Role Types
4	I as AGENT "I put a log" "I did not do anything," "I would have the cup empty" "I added water to it"
0	I as PATIENT
2	I as EXPERIENCER "I remember thinking" "I think the cup of water . . ."
6	The ants as AGENT "the ants swarmed out" "they fell off into the fire" "Some got out" " . . . they were going" "Most of them went toward the fire" "the ants could get off onto the ground"

Number	Role Types (cont.)
4	The ants as PATIENT " . . . it was full of ants" " . . . they fell off into the fire" " . . . their bodies burnt and flattened" " . . . the cup of water only steamed the ants"
1	The ants as EXPERIENCER " . . . their bodies burnt and flattened"

Role Structure Patterns

We might draw interesting thematic relationships from the frequencies of types in the passage. First, the proportion between the number of the pure AGENT to the number of individual clauses supports the idea that Hemingway subjugates comment under action. As doers responsible for action, there are 13 AGENTS in the 29 clauses in the ants episode. Second, apropos AGENT-acting, the "I" character is a pure AGENT in all cases in which he acts according to his will. As for the ants, of the six AGENT-acting cases, one of them is also a PATIENT, and for the other five cases, the ants are disoriented. Their roles might be described as "Quasi-AGENT," because in all cases, if going anywhere, they are only hustling between the poles of death. They are not responsible for the external event, the inferno taking place. As AGENT, they advance as well as retreat. To pursue the point of victimization further, we might also note that the ants are PATIENT four time whereas "I" has never been once. Their relative semantic passivity makes quite a contrast here.

The lines in the chart on the next page are examples of GOAL-related actions:

Goals

"... went first toward the centre where the fire was"
 "... not knowing where they were going"
 "Most of them went toward the fire"
 "... fell off into the fire"

Roles of I or Ants

Ants as AGENTS
 Ants as AGENTS
 Ants as AGENTS
 Ants as AGENTS

First, despite the fact that GOAL and SOURCE are related to each other in daily discourse, no SOURCE appears in the passage. Of the 12 GOALS, four involve the fire. Not unlike human existence, the AGENTS are ignorant of their SOURCE and proceed always to the unknown. Second, it is surprisingly apparent that for all the actions involving dangerous, fiery GOALS, ants are the AGENTS which, instead of running away from the fire, rush toward it. While their original will is to get away from it, their physical bodies urge them to their deaths.

The "I" character has been twice an EXPERIENCER, and the ants once. The protagonist's cool, calm thinking strongly contrasts with the burning and flattening disaster experienced by the ants. Still, in terms of action, the protagonist is only watching, occasionally moving the log and the cup, constituting a picture of burning the desperate, living mass.

The World View

Hemingway's world view as explicated from the ant incident is fatalistic; there is an absence of ethical concerns regarding actions and the presence of an "impersonal" force causing the catastrophe. As for the action of burning, the protagonist is the AGENT who goes camping and builds a fire which brings about the disaster for the ants. As for the action of watching, the protagonist is an indifferent AGENT who lets the log burn in its place. As for

the whimsical thought of being a messiah, the protagonist has the potential to do good; he then would have saved the mass if he had tried. Nevertheless, all these are independent of an ethical cause. To the ants, however, the fire is caused by an impersonal force, which has no intention of causing a disaster. The absurdity of facing choices is somehow rendered by the on-going events, which can be explained by the explicit coordination clauses. In the 29 clauses, there are 11 "ands." The sequence of events, leading to the emptying action of the cup, only stops the attempt of being a messiah and kills the ants by steaming them all. As a understatement of the fatalistic decree, the events in the incident of burning ants are inevitable.

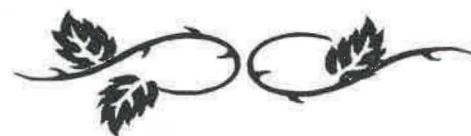
While role-structure analysis may first seem confusing, such a linguistic skill will mature through experience with different texts and through constant practice. This method seems to work especially well in small group work in my literature course. Through trial and error, students participate enthusiastically in role-structure conversation probing authors' world views, which leads to discussion of style and theme. I usually begin with an example of a short explication (such as the example above), without worrying too much about the theory of case grammar and role relations. Gradually, students learn to not only justify their own perceptions, but also appreciate the stylistic sophistication of an author.

Works Cited

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***Sunrise on Lake Superior***

Leafless trees in November snow
 beyond which barely rippling
 waters of Lake Superior.
 At the pastel pink of eastern horizon
 and above that deep blue sky,
 a long span of cloud
 stretches across morning's horizon.
 Nothing's going on.



Elmer Suderman has published poems, short stories, and scholarly articles from New York to California and Minnesota to Texas. Past President of MCTE, he is Professor Emeritus at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN.

