

Hector's death

A Systemic Socio-Semantic analysis of Alice Oswald's "Memorial"

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1. Introduction

Unlike much mainstream stylistics (e.g., Stockwell 2002, Simpson 2014, and Burke, Evers 2014), Donna Miller following Halliday (1973) and especially Hasan (1985) argues that the language of verbal art is not simply a distinct register identified by the presence or absence of various textual features such as alliteration, metaphor, assonance, rhyme etc. Many of these "literary features" are encountered in other forms of language, for example advertisements. Nor though is verbal art simply another form of ordinary language. The designation "art" implies specialness. Both Hasan's and Miller's thinking have been influenced by Jan Mukařovský whose notion of foregrounding provides a key entry point into the analysis of a piece of verbal art as something special. For Hasan and Miller the analysis of a piece of verbal art consists of first-order meanings based on the patterning of the lexicogrammar and higher order symbolic meanings which arise from the patterns foregrounded (Miller, Turci 2007). Unlike other forms of language the lexicogrammatical choices are not selected by the context but form the verbalisation which realises the symbolic articulation of the text.

An analyst first examines the lexicogrammatical patterns and only then is he/she able to investigate the symbolic meanings highlighted by the foregrounded lexicogrammatical patterns. These second-order patterns which Hasan calls the theme are not revealed directly to the reader but rather inferred from the foregrounding of patterns (Hasan 2007, p. 23). The symbolic articulation of the theme articulates deep issues relating to human social existence. It is this that renders verbal art special. Miller (2021, p. 24) notes that it is the presence of a theme that allows us to identify a text as verbal art.

In this paper I will examine the final section of an 84-page poem, *Memorial* by Alice Oswald (Oswald 2011). *Memorial* is a retelling of the *Iliad*,

but one that condenses the action by memorialising the names and deaths of over 200 characters in the Greek Trojan war. The last to die was Hector, the Trojan hero, and the extract (*ibid.*, pp. 71-72) I will focus on describes his death. The extract comprises 25 lines and is presented below. In order to illustrate the foregrounded patterns which realise the symbolic articulation of the extract, I first conducted a grammatical analysis of the poem inspired by Hasan's (1985) analysis of the Les Murray poem *The Widower in the Country*. Then in order to fully explicate Miller's model of *Systemic Socio-Semantic Stylistics* (SSSM) I adopted her argument for the inclusion of Jacobson's principle of parallelism (Miller 2021, Chapter 3).

1. And HECTOR¹ died like everyone else
2. He was in charge of the Trojans
3. But a spear found out the little patch of white
4. Between his collarbone and his throat
5. Just exactly where a man's soul sits
6. Waiting for the mouth to open
7. He always knew it would happen
8. He who was so boastful and anxious
9. And used to nip home deafened by weapons
10. To stand in full armour in the doorway
11. Like a man rushing in leaving his motorbike running
12. All women loved him
13. His wife was Andromache
14. One day he looked at her quietly
15. He said I know what will happen
16. And an image stared at him of himself dead
17. And her in Argos weaving for some foreign woman
18. He blinked and went back to work
19. Hector loved Andromache
20. But in the end he let her face slide from his mind
21. He came back to her sightless
22. Strengthless expressionless
23. Asking only to be washed and burned
24. And his body wrapped in soft cloths
25. And returned to the ground

1. Original capitals.

2. The analysis of the lexicogrammar

In this section I will examine Oswald's lexicogrammatical choices starting with tense before moving onto looking at reference. Next I will examine theme followed by voice and conclude by looking at clause process types. At the end of this section I will summarise the overall patterning of lexicogrammatical choices.

The extract is situated in the past with time expressed by the selection of the past simple tense in all ranking clauses. The events are described as completed. Any deviations will thus be foregrounded. In line 5 Oswald in the subordinate clause "just exactly where a man's soul sits" chooses the present simple "sits" rather than the past simple "sat". By so doing she draws our attention to the humanity of Hector: he has a soul just as we do. His life is as precious as any other. In line 15 there is a double projection with a mental projection embedded within a verbal one. The verbal projection "said" situates the act of saying in the past. But Oswald situates the mental projection in the non-past. The projecting clause is in the present simple with the projected clause expressing high probability of the likelihood of an event that has not occurred at the time of speaking. The effect is to align us as readers with the immediacy of Hector's thoughts: his view of the likelihood of what will happen in his future which is our past. And we of course know that Hector's fate was to be killed by Achilles' spear.

Hector is referred to on 16 occasions in the extract. On 2 occasions the proper noun Hector is chosen. The first reference introduces Hector as a new character in the poem, but the second reference (line 19) serves to focus attention on him as an individual. On 11 occasions a third person pronoun – "he", "him", "himself" – is chosen. On 2 occasions there is a meronymic reference to "his collarbone and his throat" (line 4) and "his body" (line 24). By reducing Hector to his corporal parts, Oswald foregrounds his materiality and mortality. In the mental projection (line 15) the first person pronoun "I" is chosen. This choice results in rendering Hector immediate to us. He is not a stranger but rather an intimate whose private knowledge is available to us. To summarise, Oswald employs reference to foreground lines 4, 15, 19, and 24.

The extract comprises 19 non-rankshifted clauses and, as Table 1 indicates, the theme is primarily unmarked and it is Hector. Of the 17 unmarked themes, 12 refer to Hector and thus form the background of the poem. As can be seen of the Hector themes 3 stand out. Namely the first person pronoun "I" in line 15, and the reference to Hector in lines 24 and 25 as no more

than an inert body without agency. The theme “And his body” orientates the reader towards a representation of an event where Hector’s remains are ritually handled as a ceremonial object and not as a person². The remaining five topical themes form three groups. The first is “a spear” and “it”, which is an anaphoric reference to death. These themes draw attention to the cause of Hector’s demise and to its inevitability. The theme “an image” orientates the reader to Hector’s passivity when confronted by his future. He, perhaps duty bound, accepts his fate and does not attempt to escape the image that confronts him. The final two foregrounded unmarked themes are “All women” and “His wife”. These themes orient the reader to Hector not as a warrior but rather as a man engaging with non-violent domestic matters. The two foregrounded marked themes signal transitions in the text. The first, “One day”, orients the reader to the very day when Hector is confronted by his fate and chooses not to oppose it. The second, “But in the end” orients to his passivity in letting go what he loves, namely Andromache.

To summarise Oswald’s choice of theme, we can see that her choices result in the foregrounding of lines 3, 12-16, 18-20, and 24-25.

The following paragraphs examine the transitivity patterns in the extract in order to see how Oswald construed what was going on in the poem. Table 2 summarises the clause process types line by line.³

Thirty-two verb processes were identified in the extract. Passive voice occurred only in non-ranking clauses. Of those, 4 are found in lines 23 to 25 at the very end of the extract in a sequence of material process clauses. Oswald’s lexicogrammatical choices foreground the transformation of Hector from a sentient living being into an inert body to be handled and manipulated by others. These non-ranking clauses are additionally highly marked in that the poet elides the participants; we as readers are forced to infer the identity of the actor and insert the identity of the goal, Hector’s corpse. This results in our attention being drawn to Hector’s fate and the foregrounding of lines 23 to 25.

There are 16 ranking clauses: defined either as an independent clause e.g., a paratactic clause such as 11.1 (line 18) or 13 α (line 21), or as a projecting clause such as 9.1 (line 15)⁴. Material process types are the most prevalent

2. Readers familiar with the *Iliad* will know that prior to being returned to the Trojans, Hector’s corpse was stripped of his armour, dragged behind Achilles’ chariot around the walls of Troy and subsequently desecrated by other Greek soldiers. This all happened despite Hector’s dying plea that his body be respected. The body was only returned to the Trojans after the pleading of Hector’s father Priam. On its return it can have been no more than a lump of bloody meat.

3. Table 2 and other supplementary files are available at <https://osf.io/5tg98/>.

4. Cf. Table 3 available at the URL provided above.

Table 1. *Theme in the extract.*

Theme	Unmarked	Marked
Number	17	2
Realisation	Hector – (Hector 2, He 6, I 1, His Body 2) A spear 1 It 1 All women 1 His Wife 1 An image 1	One day But in the end

with 6 occurrences. On 5 occasions Hector is actor while in the other occurrence he is the second participant functioning as goal (line 3). There are three mental process clauses, two of which construe the inner workings of Hector's mind as a thinker (line 7) and as an emoter (line 19). The other (line 12) construes Hector as a phenomenon desired by "all women". Oswald's writing is ambiguous as to whether the "love" is romantic (*eros*) or affectionate (*agape*). But in either case Hector is construed as a person of value to others. There are three relational processes which function to identify Hector's role (line 2), evaluate his character (line 8) and identify Andromache (line 13). In the context of the poem the use of relational processes does not function to foreground deviations but rather to identify roles and construe the paradoxical nature of Hector's character. The sole verbal process clause (line 15) both verbalises Hector's knowledge of his impending and unavoidable fate and construes Andromache as the recipient of this unwelcome news. There are three behavioural process clauses. The first (line 1) construes Hector's death as a natural and inevitable occurrence. Such a construal obscures the violent nature of his death and Achilles' agency. The second (line 18) construes an important transition in the narrative. Hector has informed his beloved Andromache of his fate and seen a premonition of her unfortunate destiny, but nonetheless he "blinks" and erases his mind prior to "returning to work"⁵. His work of course is killing. Oswald's lexicogrammatical choice simultaneously construes Hector's involuntary rapid gesture of opening and closing his eyes, and his mental act of cognition

5. I have coded "blink" as an involuntary behavioural process rather than as a deliberate action as in my reading of the poem the action signifies a blend of material and mental processes (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, p. 301).

involved in resigning himself to his fate. The remaining behavioural process clause (line 16) is unusual in that the behavior is not a conscious and animate being but rather “an image”. The nominal phrase “an image” signifies an artificial representation of something else; in this case a depiction of Hector’s lifeless body. Oswald’s choice construes Hector’s precognitive future self as the behavior and Hector himself as the location of the behavioural process.

Turning to the remaining 16 processes found in the non-ranking clauses we can see that 14 of them are material processes. These processes form the pattern upon which any deviation occurs. There is one mental process clause (line 15) which construes Hector’s estimation of what awaits him. The verbal process (line 23) is foregrounded both by the choice of process and more importantly by the fact that Hector as sayer on his return to Andromache – the receiver of his talk – is dead. Summing up Oswald’s transitivity choices result in the foregrounding of lines 1, 3, 7, 12, 19, 15, 16, 18, 23.

As can be seen when the lexicogrammatical patternings are examined *in toto*, Oswald’s lexicogrammatical choices foregrounded elements throughout the extract. Yet, it is not the case that the entire extract is composed of deviant language, it is rather that out of the five lexicogrammatical systems I have investigated there is at least one instance of a foregrounded choice found in every line.

3. Hasanian theme

As noted earlier the deep meaning of the poem or Hasanian theme is not revealed directly by the lexicogrammatical choices but rather inferred from the foregrounding of patterns. However, Halliday (2002 [1982]) and especially Hasan (1985) note that what is significant is patterning which is consistent. In Hasan’s words: “There are two aspects to this consistency: the stability of its semantic direction, and the stability of its textual location” (*ibid.*, p. 95). We will start with the later of these concepts. Within the extract there are three locations which are textually significant. The first is the opening which shifts the focus of the poem onto Hector who was the last to die. Here the foregrounded patterns symbolically articulate that in the inner world of the poem Hector’s death was inevitable. He was predestined to be speared, and the identity of his unnamed killer is of no consequence. We, of course, know that Achilles killed Hector, but Oswald’s lexicogrammatical choices imply a text internal world where such knowledge is su-

perfluous⁶. The marked theme “One day” (line 14) orientates the reader to a specific day where the lexicogrammatical patterning construes Hector as knowing and accepting his and Andromache's fate. The use of the personal pronoun “I” coupled with the non-past tense predicator “know” and the modal “will” represent Hector as tragic by construing him at a moment when the possibility of him avoiding death existed. But yet the behavioural process “blinked” signals Hector's acceptance of his destiny to end up dead and to lose Andromache. The second marked theme “But in the end” orientates the reader to Hector's own end. The use of passive voice with elided actor construes a depersonalised ritual signalling the culmination of Hector's fate.

Within the extract there is a consistency of patterning towards a construal of Hector's death as expected. His tragedy was that he was keenly aware of what awaited him but he did not have the volition to change it. He is construed as a man whose work is war and one who knows what that entails; one who waits for his precognition to actualise and for him to be transformed into an object handled by others in a ritualistic fashion. As a work of art the extract contains a theme which Hasan (1985, p. 95) notes is the highest level of abstraction and one “which can be viewed as a hypothesis about some aspect of social life”. In other words, it speaks of our reality. War consumes those who engage in it. Warriors have little choice but to accept their fate and all they can ask for is that their sacrifice be honoured. They will gain no personal glory. We as readers are tasked with recognising the futility of war and perhaps provoked to oppose it.

Hasan (*ibid.*, pp. 102-103) recognises that an individual human's interpretation of any text is distinctive and dependent on a unique life history, and the context in which the text is interpreted. The poem *Memorial* is itself a modern English language response to a classical Greek text, the *Iliad*, itself likely a response to earlier oral poems (Lane Fox 2023). While Oswald's text construes the brutality, randomness, and mercilessness of war but not the glory of the victory, it is quite likely that readers' interpretation of the extract from *Memorial* will be partly formed by their prior familiarisation, if any, with Homer's work. There can be no one single interpretation of the

6. Achilles, the main hero of the *Iliad*, is conspicuously absent from *Memorial*. He is construed on page 36 as “a kidnapper of boys” and alluded to on page 63 as Patroclus' foster brother. On page 69 he is construed as a sayer who rejects Lycaon's plea that he be spared death and on page 70 he is represented as having “killed so many men”. Oswald's text internal world does not mention that Patroclus was slain by Hector and that Lycaon, Hector's half-brother, and many other men were killed by Achilles to revenge Patroclus. Neither is there mention of the duel fought beneath the walls of Troy by Hector and Achilles which ended in Hector's death.

extract but neither is the text value-free. Readers access the extract's theme through their individual interpretation of the symbolic articulation verbalised by foregrounded lexicogrammatical patterns.

Miller (2021, Chapter 3) provides a robust and convincing argument for the addition of pervasive parallelism (PP), Jakobson (1966) to SSSM while recognising that the somewhat vague concept needs redefining. She (*ibid.*, pp. 39-41) notes that in SFL terms PP means shifting to the perspective of the syntagm: the reiteration of equivalent elements foregrounds patterns and motivates a consistency of semantic direction. While there are numerous compositional hierarchies where elements can be reiterated I chose in the paragraphs below to focus on the rank of vowel phoneme in the phonological hierarchy. Miller (*ibid.*, pp. 39-40) states that while the repetition of elements in SFL is classified as a structural cohesive device realising textual meanings, it frequently confers more than is needed or in her words, "a notable surplus of cohesive harmony". Thus, and following Martin (1992), as it is textually superfluous it is exploited for other means. And for Miller (2021, p. 41), PP functions like Hasan's foregrounding of lexicogrammatical patterns which enable a reader to infer the theme of a piece of verbal art.

Neither the extract, nor the entire poem rhymes. Yet, there is repetition of vowel phonemes within the extract. In clause complex 3 the diphthong /aʊ/ occurs 3 times and foregrounds Hector's death; there can be no escape from the predestined "spear" and the "mouth" between the collarbone and throat which awaits it. Oswald conveys the violence and brutality of Hector's demise by the repeated patterning of /aʊ/ which Eddington and Nuckolls (2019, p. 6) claim connotes the heavy movement of the spear piercing Hector's flesh. Tentatively we can go further and argue that /aʊ/ as an articulation conveys the pain that Hector felt as he died.

The most commonly found stressed vowel in the extract is the diphthong /əʊ/. In clause complex 3, it patterns to foreground Hector's duality. He is matter and spirit but mortal. His death is the end. In clause complex 5 /əʊ/ occurs 3 times and foregrounds Hector as a man with too little time. His visits home are fleeting and only temporary respites from the battle outside. Oswald depicts him as "boastful" but the repetition of /əʊ/ connotes the possibility that his boasting masks his own knowledge of his impending death. In clause complex 9 the diphthong /əʊ/ occurs as a result of Oswald's choice of non-past tense. Its unexpected occurrence – cf. discussion of tense above – denotes Hector as knowing his and Andromache's fate. In clause complex 5, line 11, the words "rushing" and "running" are an example of PP which further conveys the limited time available to Hector, and con-

notes that he is trapped by the speed of events. The diphthong /aɪ/ is found throughout the poem and textually it links “died”, “white”, “wife” and “slide”. This connotes a man who could not avoid the spear. It was predestined to find the gap in between his armour and helmet. He was a man who was on his way to death, and who had to abandon and forget the woman he loved.

In clause complex 13 the repetition of the unstressed suffix “-less” depicts Hector as transformed by death into an object without perception, volition and action. The vowel /æ/ is repeated in the same clause complex and it conveys the inevitability of Hector's death and his final fate as an object of a funeral rite⁷. To conclude this section we have seen that the pervasive parallel patterning of the vowels connotes an inner text world where Hector's death is unavoidable and fated. He is trapped by circumstances and duty and that is his tragedy. PP supports the foregrounding of lexicogrammatical choices in establishing the constraints which enable a reader to interpret the extract's theme: namely to paraphrase the gospel of Matthew: “that those who live by the sword die by the sword”⁸.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the analysis has illustrated the robustness of SSSM in articulating the theme of an extract from the poem *Memorial*. We have further seen that Miller's (2021) proposal to incorporate PP is a sound one. Detailed analysis of the lexicogrammatical choices and the persuasive patterning of vowel phonemes revealed what was special about the extract namely that it spoke of a deep issue of human existence: the tragedy and folly of war. Or to repeat the earlier paraphrase of St Matthew: “that those who live by the sword die by the sword”.

7. Outside of the internal text world, readers who are familiar with the *Iliad* will no doubt mark the irony that Andromache was made aware of Hector's death as she was drawing his bath.

8. Oswald herself in the introduction to *Memorial* describes her poem as “an oral cemetery” (p. 2).