

## Original Paper

# *The Old Man and the Sea* Revisited in a Linguistic Perspective

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### **Abstract**

*Hemingway's novel The Old Man and the Sea was published in 1952 and won the Nobel Prize for Literature two years later. As an excellent work created by Hemingway, the language style of the Old Man and the Sea highlights Hemingway's literary characteristics. He likes to use simple and colloquial language and flexible collocation of verbs and nouns to drive the plot development of the story, and then combine various rhetorical devices with his own language style to enrich the ideas of the whole novel. Many creative skills make the whole novel memorable, fully show the linguistic features of the Old Man and the Sea. From the perspective of linguistics, this paper analyzes the unique aesthetic style created by the powerful expression techniques in the novel. This paper analyzes the novel from two perspectives: linguistic features and metaphorical meaning. In terms of linguistic features, this paper mainly analyzes the concise language style, the ingenious use of personal pronouns and the appropriate code-switching. In terms of metaphorical meaning, this paper mainly analyzes the metaphorical meaning of the old man, the sea, the shark and marlin and the lion in this novel.*

### **Keywords**

*Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea, linguistic feature, metaphorical meaning*

## **1. Introduction**

Hemingway always adheres to the concise language style in his works, especially in the narrative language of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Hemingway's unique language style is known as "iceberg" style in the literary circle. This concise language expression technique can convey deeper thoughts and emotions to readers (Cheng, 2013).

Hemingway's characters are never grandiose, and he never uses too much flowery language, which is consistent with his simple and crisp writing style. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway portrays the tough image of a sea fisherman, showing the indomitable and brave persistence of human nature. *The Old Man and the Sea* not only uses concise and simple language to shape the classic image of the hero, at the same time, it is also the perfect display of Hemingway's iceberg creation style. If one wants to feel

Hemingway's personality charm and creation charm, he must fully grasp Hemingway's linguistic features and metaphorical techniques in the lines of his works.

## 2. The Linguistic Features of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

### 2.1 Concise Language Style

Hemingway's unique language style can convey a deeper level of thought and emotion and creation purpose to readers. This condensed and concise language style firmly grasps the reader's thoughts and psychology. At the same time, the language style shows Hemingway's humble and restrained temperament. He gives the most direct and objective description of the characters, and does not make any comments or explain the characters and events in his works; he presents the most simple sentences to the readers, does not express any emotional attitude of his own, and does not impose his personal purpose on the readers.

In terms of vocabulary, he likes to use simple words in his novels. Generally speaking, rich content is obtained by rich vocabulary. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, however, Hemingway often uses small, basic and common English words, and mostly nouns rather than verbs. This is evident in the first paragraph of the book. The longest word in the first paragraph, permanent, has just nine letters. The average length is just 3.5 letters. Except for the two professional words gaff and harpoon, the other words used in this paragraph are basic and common words, which can be understood by the average beginner of English. In this paragraph, the author mostly uses nouns instead of verbs. Among the 146 words, the author uses 10 verbs and 7 adjectives. When expressing modification, the author often uses nouns to modify nouns, which makes the article concise and simple, reflecting the author's consistent creation style.

Moreover, Hemingway often uses very short sentences in *The Old Man and the Sea*, making the novel more rhythmic by means of short sentences as the main body and long sentences as the auxiliary. In this novel, a sentence is usually ten words or less, but compared with other long sentences, it is easier for the reader to understand and make people want to read. The following passage about Santiago's fight with the shark is a good example:

*I must not think nonsense, he thought. Luck is a thing that comes in many forms and who can recognize her? I would take some though in any form and pay what they asked. I wish I could see the glow from the lights, he thought. I wish too many things. But that is the thing I wish for now. He tried to settle more comfortably to steer and from his pain he knew he was not dead.*

The paragraph contains seven sentences. The first and fifth sentences are simple sentences with only five words each, while the rest are extremely simple compound sentences consist of a main clause and a short attributive or object clause with fewer words. The repeated use of this simple sentence pattern gives the article an urgent and rapid effect, reflecting the intense intensity of Santiago's fight with the shark.

In addition, the author does not use flowery words and lengthy psychological description to depict the character image, but through simple language, so that readers can directly describe a tough fisherman in their mind, leaving a huge space for readers to imagine. The old man is both warm and tough, his "tough

guy” image deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. Hemingway’s concise language captures the calm attitude and elegant style of an old man fishing under pressure (Liu, 2014).

## 2.2 Ingenious Use of Personal Pronouns

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, only a dozen characters appear in the whole story, most of them are only indirectly mentioned or flashed in the story, and the only two main characters who can really be counted as roles are the old man and the boy. But it is in such a short story with few characters that the author uses a large number of individual deixis, among which the third person deixis appears most frequently. In most of the languages we know, there is a personal pronoun system composed of three persons. They are associated with a specific time, place and person, and they represent the relationship between things and people’s social relations in a specific context (He, 2000). The personal deixis is generally used to refer to people, and *it* is used to refer to animals, objects, things or babies (Guan, 2006). But in *The Old Man and the Sea*, the personal pronouns used to refer to people are used extensively to refer to animals, objects, things or concepts.

E.g. *He did not take it though. He was gone and the old man felt nothing.*

*“He can’t have gone,” he said. “Christ knows he can’t have gone. He’s making a turn. Maybe he has been hooked before and he remembers something of it.”*

After a long wait, Santiago finally waited for a fish to hit the bait deep under the water. The old man was so excited and delighted that he uttered the above sentence almost in a trembling voice, and referred to the fish with the masculine third person pronoun *he*, which he continued to use throughout the rest of the story. The old man used the pronoun that usually refers to people to refer to the fish, giving the fish the wisdom and spirituality of people (Dong, 2006). The big fish is a strong match for the old man, using *he* to call it not only shows that the big fish is special, but also shows the old man’s extremely cautious attitude when facing strong hands.

E.g. *“I am a tired old man. But I have killed this fish which is my brother and now I must do the slave work.”*

In the long stand-off confrontation, the old man learned more and more about the extraordinary ability of the big fish and began to admire him. Therefore, the old man called the big Fish his friend more than once and regarded him as his brother.

E.g. *“Half fish,” he said. “Fish that you were. I am sorry that I went too far out. I ruined us both. But we have killed many sharks, you and I, and ruined many others. How many did you ever kill, old fish? You do not have that spear on your head for nothing.”*

Later, when the wild shark attacked, the old man and the big fish had become one. In order to protect the big fish from infringement, and to maintain his dignity, the old man and the big fish face the bad luck and fight with the shark together. So the old man used the first person plural pronoun *we/us* many times to refer to himself and the big fish.

E.g. *“He didn’t beat you. Not the fish.”*

The boy was able to feel the subtle and complex emotions as well as the old man, so the fish still had the human spirit in his eyes, so he referred to the fish as “he” like the old man.

*E.g. Luck is a thing that comes in many forms and who can recognize her?*

Hemingway used the singular third person feminine object pronoun *her* to refer to luck. The old man had bad luck for more than eighty days in a row and was considered *salao*. Finally, an unusually large fish is hooked, only to be attacked by a series of sharks. The old man said it in this case. How desperate the old man was for good luck! He cherished the luck he had just had and looked forward to the future. In this case, the author uses the personal pronoun *her* instead of *it* to refer to the inanimate thing “luck”, which perfectly expresses the old man’s complex feelings of regret and sadness for bad luck, longing and expectation for good luck at this moment.

### 2.3 Appropriate Code-switching

The communicators can accomplish some specific goals by switching the codes. Using some foreign language variations is an apparent characteristic in this novel, which serves different functions: adapting to the linguistic reality and the mental motivation.

Adaptation to linguistic reality means that the code-switching is the use of two or more languages or language varieties caused by pure linguistic factors, which completely happened on the basis of the language-internal reasons. If some concepts or ideas do not exist in one language, or it’s not easy to find the equivalent expressions that only exist in another language, language users may switch the codes in order to show what they exactly want to express.

*E.g. But after forty days without a fish the boy’s parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally salao, which is the worst form of unlucky.*

In this sentence, code-switching is a way of expressing something cannot be described accurately in English. The Spanish word “*salao*” means the most unlucky in English. Hemingway failed to find a more appropriate word in English to express the degree of unlucky, so he chose the Spanish word “*salao*” to show the old man’s bad luck.

*E.g. The shack was made of the tough bud-shields of the royal palm which are called guano.*

“Guano” means the excrement of sea birds in English. The Spanish word “*guano*” means royal palm, which is a kind material to build the old man’s shack. The writer chose the local language to describe the thing only exists in Spain.

Adapting to the mental motivation means that language users take advantage of code-switching to accomplish his communicative goals. In the novel, the writer chose code-switching as a strategy to express the old man’s emotions for the sake of enriching characters’ personalities.

*E.g. He always thought of the sea as la mar which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her.*

In Spanish, words are masculine or feminine, singular or plural. The use of “*la mar*” exerts a remarkable influence on reflecting the man’s intense passion on the sea. He compared the sea to a lady, which expresses the old man’s intensive love and gratitude towards the sea.

Additionally, the writer also adopted code-switching to describe the inner world and thoughts of the old man, which vividly presents the fight between the old man and the sharks, and makes the plot of the fiction more attractive to catch readers' eyes.

E.g. "*Galanos.*" he said aloud.

*"Galanos. Come on Galanos."* They came.

When he saw the sharks at first sight, he felt a sense of danger. Because he knew that this kind of sharks was furious, he shouted out their names "galanos" unconsciously. When the shark came back again, he realized that he has no option but to fight with them. He helplessly and mechanically repeated their names "galanos", which seems to show his determination to meet the challenge. The writer switched the codes to indicate that the old man was ready to fight with the sharks.

From the above analysis, it's clear to know that code-switching plays a vital role in the fiction. The code-switching is used not only to express characters' inner world, but also replace some concepts that cannot be described in English.

### 3. The Metaphorical Meaning of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

There are a lot of metaphors in *The Old Man and the Sea*, which is also the concrete embodiment of Hemingway's "iceberg" style, reflecting the author's way of looking at and reflecting the world. Metaphor can reproduce the historical creation background in the description of characters and things, express the author's feelings and experiences, and then stimulate the artistic charm of literary works. It can be said that many images in *The Old Man and the Sea* have some kind of metaphorical symbolic meaning, which makes the expression of the novel show multiple meanings.

#### 3.1 The Metaphorical Meaning of the Old Man

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the old man is depicted by the author as a character with rich experience, perseverance and fighting spirit, and is an important representative of the tough man image. Poverty and bad luck made an ordinary old fisherman brave and strong, as glorious as a hero who died in battle. He never gave up life, and always regard fishing as a lifelong career. Santiago believes that fishing is where a fisherman can prove his dignity in life. Even with old age, Santiago's heart is still full of fighting spirit. He remembers his fading passion and youth with words and actions, and keeps sailing on the sea of pursuit of ideals (Zhang, 2014). In fact, the author uses such a fisherman image as a metaphor for the twists and turns of his own life. The twists and turns of Santiago's fate are the true story of Hemingway's life. Hemingway lived through two world wars. As a soldier, he was physically and mentally damaged. As a writer, he was oppressed. The experience of Santiago's eighty-four consecutive days of failed fishing is a metaphor for Hemingway's own hardship, and Santiago's perseverance is a metaphor for Hemingway's determination to complete a terrible work.

#### 3.2 The Metaphorical Meaning of the Sea

The sea is Santiago's bread and butter, but also the object he needs to conquer. The sea is so deep that it not only provides conditions for Santiago to survive, but also brings danger to Santiago's life. Like the

battlefield of life, it is both kind and fierce, unpredictable and imperceptible, like maternal softness and also dark claws. While the old man is struggling to catch fish, there will also be sharks always coveted the fruits of his labor, and even the old man's life may be at great risk at any time. Therefore, Hemingway metaphorically symbolized the sea as the predicament that must be faced in survival and life. Everyone must face the sea. In the confrontation and struggle, we may feel aimless sometimes. Even if the goal is clear, we often feel tired and want to give up. Only after experiencing all kinds of life setbacks can we find the right attitude towards life and fully understand the meaning of life.

### 3.3 The Metaphorical Meaning of the Shark and Martin

The novel highlights the protagonist's stoicism by detailing the shark's atrocities. The shark is a symbol of cruelty and evil. According to Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*, the sharks don't have to scour everywhere for the scent. They swim side by side straight towards the small sailboat, showing the natural greed and cunning of the sharks. The ferocity of the shark is a contrast to Santiago's tenacity and indomitability. He is the executor of justice and the meaning of wisdom (Wei, 2012).

The symbolic meaning of marlin is very rich, from a positive point of view, Marlin symbolizes the ideal and pursuit, from a negative point of view, Marlin is a symbol of fierce rivals. In the vast sea, Santiago often has a heart to heart conversation with the Marlins. He likes the big Marlins, and treat it as his old friend. At the end of *The Old Man and the Sea*, the big marlin's fish bones are brought back. All the fishermen were amazed at the length and weight of the big marlin, and stood in awe of Santiago. Here, the big marlin's bone is a symbol of success and glory.

### 3.4 The Metaphorical Meaning of the Lion

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the lion has been mentioned many times by Hemingway. The lion is a symbol of youth, power and bravery. The Lion was first mentioned in *The Old Man and the Sea* by Santiago and the boy while they talking about baseball. The lions reminded Santiago of his youth, when he was full of passion and ambition. The last part of the novel sublimates the theme by saying, "the old man was dreaming about the lions." The vitality, courage and justice of the lion show that the hope and spirit of Santiago will never die, and the tough guy image of Santiago will live forever in the shape of humanity.

## 4. Conclusion

*The Old Man and the Sea* is a Nobel Prize-winning work by the famous American novelist Ernest Hemingway, which occupies an important position in the history of American literature. Based on the linguistic perspective, this paper analyzed the linguistic features and metaphorical meaning of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The analysis shows that, in terms of language features, *the Old Man and the Sea* uses concise language, ingenious personal deixis and appropriate code-switching. From the perspective of metaphorical meaning in this novel, the old man is a metaphor for the twists and turns of the author's own life, which is a true portrayal of his life. The sea is a metaphor for the dilemma that survival and life must face; The shark is a metaphor for cruelty and evil; Marlin is a symbol of ideal and

pursuit, a symbol of fierce rivals, and also a symbol of success and glory; The lion is a symbol of youth, strength and bravery.

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