

## Original Paper

# A Bakhtinian Approach to the Study of Eighteenth-Century English Gothic Novels

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Received: September 19, 2021 Accepted: September 28, 2021 Online Published: October 10, 2021

doi:10.22158/sll.v5n4p42

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v5n4p42>

### Abstract

*M. M. Bakhtin in the third essay of *The Dialogic Imagination* coined the term “chronotope” to denote the interaction and integration of time and space in novelistic narratives. Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope emphasizes that time and space coordinate with each other rather than insist on their individualities in narratives. The major chronotope of the novel usually determines its generic characteristics. The current study attempts to utilize Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope to anatomize the time-space structure of major Gothic novels in the eighteenth century, namely, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe’s *Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), for the purpose of detecting and summarizing the common features of the Gothic genre. Manifold approaches and theories had been applied in this area, but it is the first time that Bakhtin’s chronotope was employed in the stylistic study of eighteenth-century Gothic novels written by Walpole and Radcliffe.*

### Keywords

*Bakhtin, chronotope, Gothic, Walpole, Radcliffe*

### 1. Introduction

Bakhtin’s four essays—“Epic and Novel”, “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” and “Discourse in the Novel”—were collected and published under the name of *The Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin’s writing has the interdisciplinary nature that “touches on linguistics, psychology, theology, sociology, and poetics”, and he is regarded as “a formalist, a structuralist, a poststructuralist, a Buberian theologian, a democratic humanist, and a Marxist of any stripe from relative orthodoxy to essential heresy” (Kershner, 1989, p. 15). The third essay provides an elaborative study on the narrative structure of the novel. Bakhtin coined

“chronotope” to denote the meaning of time-space:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84)

Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope is designated for the exposition and categorization of the novel. As two indispensable elements of novelistic narratives, time and space become the most reliable signatures for categorization. Although borrowing the mathematic idea that time is the fourth dimension of space, Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope is more dynamic and complicated, as time and space coordinate with each other rather than persevere with their individualities. His time-space configuration is charted within novelistic discourses and plot narratives, divorcing from actual historical context, and hence it represents a formalist approach to literary studies. Bakhtin suggests the correlative nature of time and space through explicating their coexistence, interdependence, and mutual realization within the novelistic domain. Novelistic time, according to Bakhtin, can be felt, experienced, and viewed through space; vice versa, novelistic space resonates with the fluctuation of time, and hence becomes dynamic and diversified. The discussions and debates on time and space or time-space are far-reaching. Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* explicates the significance of space and time in understanding the fundamental concept of *a priori*:

Kant’s answer is that there is only one way in which we can have *a priori* knowledge of spatial relations that is nevertheless not knowledge of the relations of our mere concepts: it must be knowledge of relations involving something else that we have in the mind and that we use in experiencing the world: intuition (i.e., roughly, visualization), sensibility. In other words, space must be a *form* of our intuition: we experience the world *in terms of* space, we structure it in terms of space, by contributing space to experience...Kant’s treatment of time is roughly similar: time is also a form of intuition, and hence is present in any experience. Hence, like space, time can also be intuited and known *a priori* as a necessary feature of the world as appearance. (Kant, 1987, pp. xxxii-xxxiii)

Pluhar, the translator and scholar of Kant, italicizes *form* and *in terms of* in the above expositions to stress the utility of space as a medium and a portal to sense, experience or rather intuit the world. Bakhtin’s time-space configuration is formalist and structuralist, and hence can be applied to re-define and re-categorize the literary genre by means of deducing and inducing the formal correlations on time-space structure.

Jacqueline Howard (2001) employs Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia and dialogism to investigate the diversity and interaction of various discourses in Gothic fictions. Howard agrees with Bakhtin’s opinion that novelistic discourses are social, cultural, and political. She adds gender as another feature

of the Gothic discourse. Her approach is fundamentally socio-historical, but this study focuses on the stylistic anatomy of eighteenth-century Gothic novels based on Bakhtin's connotation of chronotope. Bakhtin's work is dedicated to enumerating the schema of novels, and then to classifying them according to the similarity of schema. Consequently, novels sharing the same schema belong to the same literary genre. Usually, within one novel, the major chronotope dominates the narratives, and hence decides its generic characteristics. However, the novel is normally comprised of more than one types of chronotope. A variety of time-space structures are woven together to uphold the net of characters, events, and plots in the novel.

## 2. The Castle Chronotope of the Gothic Novels

Bakhtin's discussion of the Gothic novel is brief but penetrating, as he pinpoints the distinctive functions of the castle in Medieval romance and eighteenth-century Gothic. In chivalric romance, the castle is a piece of lifeless and contemporary architecture that functions either as the background or the destination of heroes. Its major chronotope is the "miraculous adventure", namely the journey and the road. However, in Gothic fictions, the castle has been foregrounded and turned into the crucial time-space in which major events may evolve. The climax usually happens in or around the castle:

The castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past. The castle is the place where the lords of the feudal era lived (and consequently also the place of historical figures of the past); the traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible forms as various parts of its architecture, in furnishings, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives and in the particular human relationships involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights...It is this quality that gives rise to the specific kind of narrative inherent in castles and that is then worked out in Gothic novels. (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 245-246)

Here, Bakhtin highlights the crucial nature of the castle in characterizing eighteenth-century Gothic novels. Byron and Townshend (2014) in *The Gothic World* acknowledge Bakhtin's definition of the eighteenth-century Gothic chronotope, namely "adventure-time in Gothic-architectural space" (p. xliii). As the inventories of Gothic novel increase, Townshend discovers more varieties of Gothic chronotopes, for instance the "romance-time of monstrous corporeal space", the "perverse adventure-time in urban space", and the "spectacular body" (ibid.). The eighteenth-century Gothic novels written by Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe feature either medieval castles or monasteries, which represent the anachronistic buildings of that time and symbolize the Dark Ages and the aristocracy. Circulated rumors, decorations, and the furniture of the Gothic castle exhibit a strong sense of decayed splendor and the smell of corruption. A close investigation of eighteenth-century Gothic novels will find that the exteriors of the castle, including deserted turrets, ruined ramparts, high walls,

and iron gates etc., usually give the overall impression of overwhelming depression. Moreover, its isolated location, the subterranean tunnel and the romantic forest render the Gothic castles the most suited space for secret crimes and supernatural happenings.

Bakhtin's idea of the castle not only embodies spatiality, but also denotes temporality, which means the castle space refract the features of castle time as well. When examining major Gothic novels in the eighteenth century, it is not difficult to find the similarities and commonalities between several castle configurations. For instance, the pompous and complicated furnishings may illustrate the depravity of feudal society and the vanity of the aristocracy. The heavy structures and poignant pinnacles may demonstrate a time of patriarchal mentality and male dominance. The unfathomed nature nearby may resemble the mysterious atmosphere of the Middle Ages. The castle, as an anachronistic architecture, represents the historical time as well as the sense of antiquity and barbarity. Castle time seems to deviate from normal time. It has day and night, but even daytime is shadowed with darkness as if the high walls and towering pinnacles blot out the sky and cover the sun. The design of a subterranean labyrinth further renders the space shut off from any natural lights, and only man-made torches and candles permit a certain degree of vision. Night has been prolonged by the special design of the castle space to enable the development of plots and to create the tension in the novel. The following part is an overview of the time-space configurations of major Gothic castles presented in the eighteenth-century Gothic novels composed by Walpole and Radcliffe.

### 2.1 *The Castle Chronotope of Otranto*

Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* is the founding novel of the Gothic genre. The aged-old castle has been haunted by an ancient prophecy that "the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it". This implies the histories of usurpation and murder and foreshadows the return of its principality to the "true" heir. After the biographical introduction to major characters, the narrative directly enters a "magical" world where a gigantic helmet appears from nowhere to crush the bridegroom to death in the courtyard, and a series of inexplicable events happen afterwards. As an enclosed space, the castle witnesses the ups and downs of its residents and turns into a safe box containing every secret. The special designs of trapdoor and underground tunnel facilitate the escape of Princess Isabella, and hence creates the first critical confrontation of the novel. Otranto, as a castle, functions to suspend, and then push forward the plot, which to a great extent heightens the uncanny effects. These irrational and fantastic occurrences render the time-space of Otranto to be unrealistic and supernatural, distinguishing it from the historical and realistic time-space of the realistic novel and the sentimental novel.

### 2.2 *The Castle Chronotope of Athlin and Dunbayne*

*The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* is Radcliffe's first attempt at writing a Gothic novel, which appears more like a historical novel rather than a Walpolean Gothic story. The two castles, namely Athlin and Dunbayne, represent the honour and power of two antagonistic Scottish clans. They not only

function as the fortress of defense and the space of accommodation, but also turn into the “protagonists” who witness the complicated stories of love, murder, abduction, captivity, and revenge. Radcliffe spends several passages describing the overall construction and special design of the castle of Dunbayne as well as its environs as the unique time-space configuration of Dunbayne plays a significant role in plot narratives, for instance, the escape and rescue of the Gothic hero. The sense of time-space of *Athlin and Dunbayne* is nocturnal, patriarchal, historical, and legendary without the coloring of the fantastic.

### 2.3 *The Castle Chronotope of Sicilian Romance*

The castle of Mazzini in *A Sicilian Romance* turns into a house of evil, conspiracy, and voluptuousness. The ruthless father and vicious stepmother make the sisters’ life miserable. Julia escapes from this depressive mansion to defy a forced marriage. Half of the novel is the narration of Julia’s adventure on the road; nevertheless, she eventually returns to Mazzini through some secret, underground tunnels, and discovers her mother, who had been imprisoned in the abandoned southern apartments of Mazzini for several years without notice. The castle represents an omnipotent existence for the Gothic heroines who can never get away from it.

### 2.4 *The Castle Chronotope of Forest*

In *The Romance of the Forest*, the ruined abbey is one of the major characters. The ruined abbey is both the refuge and the Pandora’s Box for La Motte and Adeline. Complicated occasions bring Adeline to la Motte who has fled from Paris with his wife to escape legal punishment. They discovered a deserted abbey that is heavily infested with mice, owls, and bats, but they decide to settle down without knowing who its true owner is or discovering its dark secret. This abbey and its environs become the best place for the villains—the Marquis and la Motte to contrive the evil schemes against Adeline. The trapdoor in the abbey functions to conceal the death of its true owner—Adeline’s father, who was murdered by the Marquis. The space of the ruined abbey is multi-layered, and different from the previous medieval and highland castles. The abbey does not have subterranean tunnels but contains numerous trapdoor and secret rooms. The experiences and emotions of the Gothic villain and the Gothic heroine when exploring the secret rooms of the abbey are determined by the location, size, and function of the various space. When entering these confined and desolate spaces, the sense of time is slowing down and elongating. Adeline’s premonitory dream represents a completely different dimension of time-space configuration. The natural order and law of the time and space has been subverted in the dream. Time is fragmented and incoherent, whereas space is also shattered and scattered randomly in the time axis, which means the inherent connection between time and space collapses. Thus, the time-space configuration of dream is fundamentally disorderly and irrational. This chaotic time-space of dream appears frequently in the Gothic novels either as a diversion or a subordination of the central castle chronotope.

### 2.5 *The Castle Chronotope of Udolpho*

Emily's first glimpse of Montoni's castle unveils the prototypical Gothic architecture of the eighteenth-century Gothic:

Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle, which she understood to be Montoni's; for, though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object. As she gazed, the light died away on its walls, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper, as the thin vapour crept up the mountain, while the battlements above were still tipped with splendour. From those too, the rays soon faded, and the whole edifice was invested with the solemn duskiness of evening. Silent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers alone were seen, rising over the tops of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to descend. (Radcliffe, 2001, p. 216)

Montoni's castle represents the most notorious Gothic castle among Radcliffe's novels. Under the command of Montoni, Udolpho becomes an asylum of bandits, a slaughterhouse of innocent people and a gigantic prison for the heroine. It is in Italy, a country alien to the Gothic heroine who is under the custody of her aunt after the death of her father. Having no alternative, Emily travels together with her aunt to Montoni's castle. Life in Udolpho becomes a nightmare for both Madame Cheron and Emily. Constant threats from Montoni and frequent supernatural happenings make the life in Udolpho unbearable, which eventually compels Emily to run away from it.

### 3. The Idyllic Chronotope of the Gothic Novels

If the castle chronotope predominates in the eighteenth-century Gothic novels and distinguishes it from other literary genres. The function of idyllic chronotope is to support the subordinate plots. The idyllic chronotope is referred to by Bakhtin as inheriting the ancient matrices consisting of elements concerning human life, for instance, birth, growth, food, love, marriage, and death etc., which exert a great impact on the entire narratives. The idyllic chronotope can be further stratified into the love idyll, the family idyll, and the agricultural idyll (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 224). Despite variations, all idyllic chronotopes share similarities that are summarized by Bakhtin as follows:

The unity of the life of generations (in general, the life of men) in an idyll is in most instances primarily defined by the unity of place, by the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable. This unity of place in the life of generations weakens and renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of one and

the same life...This blurring of all the temporal boundaries made possible by a unity of place also contributes in an essential way to the creation of the cyclic rhythmicalness of time so characteristic of the idyll. (p. 225)

The isolated space of the idyllic chronotope determines the circular feature of idyllic time. Repetition is its major characteristic, and as Bakhtin argues, novels since the eighteenth century have developed and “reworked” the idyllic matrices into the provincial novel, the Bildungsroman, the sentimental novel of the Rousseauian type, and the family novel etc. (pp. 228-229). The Gothic novel, though neglected here, belongs to “certain other categories” influenced by the idyllic chronotope.

If the castle chronotope determines the generic style and keynote of the Gothic novel, the idyllic chronotope of the branch narratives serves as the coordinator that supplements the main plot-narratives and embodies the novel’s fundamental philosophical and aesthetic values. Like Rousseau, the eighteenth-century English Gothic writers tend to “rework” the idyllic chronotope toward two directions, namely sublimation and the therapeutic (p. 230). It is essential to conduct a survey on Radcliffe’s applications of idyllic chronotopes, namely, the love idyll, the family idyll, and the agricultural idyll, to discover her reworking processes and then to exemplify the suggestive functions of philosophical sublimation and purification.

### *3.1 The Love Idyll*

Love, as a permanent motif in literature, establishes its indispensable and significant position in the novel. The pattern of love story in the eighteenth-century Gothic follows the tradition of ancient romance: virtuous heroine and gallant hero usually fall in love at first sight, but their love will go through various trials and ordeals before final consummation, for instance, Julia and Hippolitus, Adeline and Theodore, Emily and Valancourt, and Ellena and Vincentio. The thoughts and consciousness of Gothic heroes and heroines are exposed in the narratives, which are rendered highly purified and restrained by the eighteenth-century writers to fulfill the public imagination and expectation of courtly love. This non-sexual and unyielding love dominates eighteenth-century Gothic novels. What distinguishes Radcliffe’s love idyll is her characterization of the protagonist as the admirer of nature and believer in Providence. Their love originates from their mutual taste for sublime landscape and their reverence for the Omnipotent Power that is the creator of resplendent nature. Sensual love is replaced with spiritual love between the Gothic heroines and their admirers, through which the love idyll of the eighteenth-century novels achieves Bakhtin’s purification and sublimation.

### *3.2 The Family Idyll*

The novel tends to begin the narrative with an introduction to the protagonist’s family. Regarding the Gothic novel, the situation of Gothic heroines usually follows this pattern: born in a well-to-do but not luxurious family; orphaned or living with a single parent in a remote area of the country. Long paragraphs are dedicated to describing their humble residences, and the exquisite and romantic natural landscape around them. The interactions between Gothic heroines and their family members are

characterized as possessing parental affection and filial piety. Radcliffe, through her depictions, successfully creates an atmosphere of harmony that is normally tinted with melancholic sentiments caused by the characters' infelicity or insalubrity.

Radcliffe follows the tradition of family idyll by utilizing the ancient topics of birth, growth, illness, and death, etc.; however, her family idyll extends the mere function of neutral account to serve a particular purpose - to contrast with the corrupted life in the metropolitan city. Through this contrast, the family idyll in Radcliffe's Gothic expresses the nostalgia for pastoral life, and the detestation of hypocrisy. Family idyll is transformed from a neutral description to reflecting the author's ideology, which is one aspect of sublimation in Radcliffe's work.

The family idyll of the eighteenth-century novels is distinctive for another reason, which is that it facilitates the important life transitions of Gothic heroines. Julia's mother in *Sicilian Romance* is secretly imprisoned in an unreachable corner of the castle by her tyrannical father, who compels Julia to accept an arranged marriage against her will, which eventually results in her flight. In *Udolpho*, the death of Emily's parents forces her to live under the custody of her aunt, who later marries Montoni and confines her in the castle of Udolpho, where begins the nightmare and the journey of adventure. Adeline in *Forest* and Ellena in *The Italian* both go through the experience of identity retrieval. Domestic calamity is the main reason behind their youthful separation from their parents, which results in a series of adversities in their later lives. Hence, the deaths of parents turn into a crucial event for Gothic heroines, whose lives undergo a radical change from that moment. The traditional family idyll represents the repetitious life circle, in which every event of a human life is equally important, or rather equally unimportant; however, in Radcliffe's novels, family events are foregrounded and occupy an indispensable position in plot narratives.

### 3.3 The Agricultural Idyll

The agricultural idyll later developed into provincial novels is another essential component of the eighteenth-century Gothic novels. As Bakhtin suggests, the agricultural idyll usually combines with family idyll to fully unfold the ancient matrices and achieve folkloric time (p. 226). With the focus on "the real life of the agricultural laborer under conditions of feudal or post-feudal society—although this life is to one degree or another idealized and sublimated" (pp. 226-227), the agricultural idyll attempts to create a utopia of natural beauty, simple folks, and self-sufficient life cycle, which is the opposite of the urban bourgeois society. The agricultural idyll depicted in the Gothic novels conforms to the eighteenth-century fashion of returning to nature, and hence becomes the asylum for people who are tired of the complexity and hypocrisy of urban life. In Radcliffe's novels, returning to nature is achieved fundamentally in two ways—travelling and communicating with country folk. Radcliffe's major Gothic novels generally comprise extensive descriptive narratives on the geography, vegetation, natural phenomena, and social customs of certain places as well as the lives of common people there. Her writings are influenced by a variety of travelogues and paintings, and regardless of the issue of



accuracy and simulation, her topographical narratives become a unique feature of her writings, which led a literary fashion in the late eighteenth century.

In addition to travel, the agricultural idyll is achieved through the communications and interactions between Gothic protagonists and the peasants, which demonstrates their appreciation for rural life and respect for agricultural laborers. Adeline's first impressions of Peter's hometown are described as follows: "Adeline, lost in admiration of the astonishing and tremendous scenery around her, assented very warmly to the truth of Peter's assertion" (Radcliffe, 2009, p. 522). Following the descriptions of Adeline's admiration and Peter's satisfaction comes the narrator's opinion of this idyllic world: "His native village, indeed, was an exception to the general character of the country, and to the usual effects of an arbitrary government; it was flourishing, healthy, and happy" (p. 523). This passage conveys the message that rural life is superior to life in urban society through sublimating the countryside into a utopia where dwells only contentment and happiness.

The narratives of agricultural idyll are featured not only with natural description and rural scenery, but also with characters who have the taste and appreciation for nature and simplicity. The innocence and self-contentment embodied by the peasants have the healing effects for characters who love and admire nature. Bakhtin mentions the therapeutic functions of the agricultural idyll:

In novels of the Rousseauian type, the major protagonists...heal themselves through contact with nature and the life of simple people, learning from them the wisdom to deal with life and death, or they go outside the boundaries of culture altogether, in an attempt to utterly immerse themselves in the wholeness of the primitive collective. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 231)

Conforming to Bakhtin's idea, Radcliffe attributes the restoration of St. Aubert to the harmonious rural scenery and the hospitality of peasants: "St. Aubert's spirits were so far restored by the courtesy of his host, and the near prospect of repose, that he looked with a sweet complacency upon the moonlight scene, surrounded by the shadowy woods" (Radcliffe, 2001, p. 175). The conversations between St. Aubert and his host called La Voisin on the issue of life and death have more soothing effects for the former. La Voisin's faith in Providence, belief in the afterlife and open-mindedness concerning death are values generally promoted in the eighteenth century.

So far, this part has elaborated on Bakhtin's notion of chronotope, and extends his analysis of the vital position of castle time-space in the Gothic novels. Moreover, the existence of the idyllic chronotope in the eighteenth-century Gothic, which has been neglected by Bakhtin, is remarked on, and given detailed discussion here. Though subordinate, the idyllic chronotopes shoulder the major responsibility to convey the philosophical ideas, aesthetic values, and ethical principles of the eighteenth-century Gothic. The castle chronotope and the idyllic chronotope represent two distinctive aspects of the overall time-space structure of the Gothic genre, namely, the supernatural and the natural as well as the unrealistic and the realistic.

#### 4. Conclusion

As delineated by Bakhtin, the castle chronotope represents the most prominent feature of the Gothic novels. The sense of castle time is historical, as the Gothic novel *per se* embodies the novelistic revival of medieval feudal system and Catholicism. The sense of castle time is fantastic as resulting from the uncanny and supernatural events, which strip characters and readers of the sense of historical and natural time and push them to experience the confusion and hesitation. The sense of castle time is unexpected and abrupt, because plot narratives are ruled by the fantastic or the imaginative rather than by the natural law. The sense of castle time is usually nocturnal—though a minor feature, it requires expositions due to its relevance with the poetic nocturnes. The notion of night has gone through various stages of interpretations in literary history; however, it is generally associated with the concepts of darkness, mystery, evilness and the supernatural. The exteriority and interiority of Gothic architecture concretize the ancientness and grotesqueness of the castle time. The space here not only refers to the building, though it is generally regarded as the predominant character of the Gothic novels, but also alludes to the perception of dimension. The towering turret and the overarching ceiling give an impact of depression to the Gothic heroines who experience the discernable shifts from the grand natural landscape to the awe-inspiring building and from freedom to the sense of imprisonment. The castle time-space is consequently interpreted as the symbol of overwhelming patriarchal power.

The idyllic chronotope, though a subordinate one, organizes another configuration of time-space, which assumes an important role in the general plot narrative. Regardless of the differences between the love idyll, the family idyll, and the agricultural idyll, idyllic time has the sharing characteristic of continuity, repetition, and circulation. Unlike the monstrosity and depression of the castle time, the idyllic time normally adheres to the law of nature. Bakhtin has not discussed the notion of night in his exposition of the idyllic chronotope. Nevertheless, nighttime is essential in the idyllic chronotope of Radcliffe's Gothic novels. It is the time for relaxation, reflection, and prayer. Moreover, evening turns into a refuge for Radcliffe's heroines who could escape temporally from daytime troubles to communicate with the spiritual existence through contemplating nature. Hence, the idyllic chronotope of the eighteenth-century Gothic is tinted with religious connotation.

#### Acknowledgement

This research paper is sponsored by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities “Advancement of Young and Middle-Aged Teachers’ Research Ability—School of Foreign Languages” (2021qntd71).

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