

## Original Paper

# An Analysis of Lexical Cohesion in the Text “After Twenty Years”

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### Abstract

*Lexical cohesion plays an important role in forming a discourse, which effectively connects different part of the text and contributes to the main idea. In terms of short stories, lexical cohesion aims to linguistically enhance plot description, image building and theme expression. This study investigates the lexical devices in the short story After Twenty Years written by O. Henry. By means of discourse analysis, it turns out that O. Henry takes advantage of both reiteration and collocation. For one thing, four kinds of lexical cohesion, including repetition, synonym or near-synonym, superordinate, and general word, are all used in the text to form lexical cohesion. For another, multiple collocation chains manage to integrate the scene, the characters, and the plot from different dimensions. The overall result shows that the short story is highly cohesive, which largely makes it a great work around the world.*

### Keywords

*discourse analysis, lexical cohesion, “After Twenty Years”, short story*

## 1. Introduction

According to Yule (1983), discourse analysis revolves around how language is used in texts or utterances in order to achieve certain purposes or create certain effects. It is closely related to the cohesion and coherence of a discourse, which serve as a foundation for connecting words and sentences and thus lead to a complete and integrated whole. From this perspective, words, as the most basic unit in a discourse, function as a crucial part in carrying authors' or speakers' thoughts and preferences, building relationships between different elements, and effectively making a discourse meaningful and understandable. Therefore, the analysis of lexis in terms of how it creates lexical cohesion will enhance understanding of the discourse it forms, providing a unique perspective to explore how linguistic devices contribute to a well-arranged text.

This study intends to present lexical cohesion analysis of a well-known short story entitled *After Twenty Years* written by an American short story writer O. Henry. Choosing this short story mainly because it is regarded as one of O. Henry's representative work, which has won high praise from the literary world. It represents the writer's writing style and strategies through the management of vocabulary. Therefore, the lexical cohesion analysis focusing on the lexical devices in this story is significant for textual comprehension and appreciation. In this article, the background information of the text is first presented, followed by the analysis on lexical cohesion which includes key concept explanations and specific examples derived from the short story *After Twenty Years*.

## 2. Background Information of *After Twenty Years*

*After Twenty Years* talks about a story happening between two young Americans Jimmy and Bob. The two used to be good friends, and twenty years ago when Bob decided to make his fortune in the West, they made an appointment with each other that they would meet again at the place where Bob departed in twenty years exactly from that date and time. However, twenty years later, Bob became a lawbreaker owing to the pursuit of money, while Jimmy worked as a policeman in the city of New York. When Jimmy kept the promise and met Bob at the appointed place, he identified Bob as the wanted man in Chicago. To fulfil his duty as a policeman, Jimmy asked another policeman to arrest Bob in a deceptive way.

Through the conflict between friendship and responsibility, the story reveals and criticizes the social reality in American during the period starting from late 19th century to WWI, which appears deformed and disordered when capitalism developed rapidly and social contradictions was increasingly glaring. Bob can be regarded as a victim of that society who was encouraged and even forced to make a fortune illegally, while Jimmy was distorted and destructed by that society as he ignored friendship and human nature but prioritized his job even with honest and sincerity sacrificed, gradually becoming a machine that works for the American society without any emotion. Via the interaction between the two main characters, the story reflects a sick society and insinuates the tragedy resulting from that reality.

O. Henry's primitive name is "William Sydney Porter", and he is an American writer known primarily for his short stories, though he also wrote poetry and non-fiction. His stories are famous for naturalist observations, witty narration, and surprise ending (Wikipedia, 2024). In *After Twenty Years*, O. Henry deals with that grim social reality with a seemingly casual narrative style, integrating the plot, the characters and the environment through lexical devices, which finally produce unique artistic effects.

## 3. Lexical Cohesion

In *Cohesion in English*, Halliday and Hassan (1976) puts forward the opinion that lexical cohesion "is the cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary" (p. 274). It emphasizes the role of lexical items in a discourse which basically constitute a text. Specifically, it indicates that content words and

how they relate to each other linguistically connect different parts of the text and effectively generate cohesive relationships. Lexical cohesion has been classified into two general categories by Halliday and Hassan, namely Reiteration and Collocation (p. 288). Reiteration consists of four lexical relations, including repetition, synonym or near-synonym, superordinate, and general word, while collocation focuses on systematic co-occurrence of lexical item association (Noprival et al., 2022). In this article, the roles of reiteration and collocation for achieving lexical cohesion are illustrated respectively with examples in *After Twenty Years*.

### 3.1 Reiteration

#### 3.1.1 Reiteration: Repetition

Repetition realizes lexical cohesion by repeating the same lexical item, using the same words or phrases several times in a discourse (Ding, 2000). In *After Twenty Years*, the author frequently uses repetition, mentioning key words and phrases from time to time to establish relationships and produce cohesive effects. For example, “Jimmy” is mentioned 11 times, “the man” is mentioned 9 times, “west” is mentioned 8 times, “policeman” is mentioned 8 times, “store” is mentioned 5 times, “twenty years” is mentioned 6 times, “Bob” is mentioned 6 times, “New York” is mentioned 4 times, “light/lights” is mentioned 4 times, “friend” is mentioned 4 times, “officer” is mentioned 3 times, “restaurant” is mentioned 3 times, “street/streets” is mentioned 3 times, “meet/meets” is mentioned 3 times, and “appointment” is mentioned 2 times. With repeated occurrences of words and phrases that carry important information indicating the identity, the place, the time and the interpersonal relationship, O. Henry manages to emphasize necessary messages, which successfully leaves a deep impression upon readers and highlighted the theme.

#### 3.1.2 Reiteration: Synonym or Near-synonym

The word “synonym” in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2018) refers to “a word with the same meaning as another word in the same language” (p. 2631). Although repetition effectively generates cohesive linkage, it may result in boredom and dullness if it is overused, which not only reduces the readability of the text but also tends to demotivate the readers. However, synonym or near-synonym expresses the same idea in a new way and enriches the content of a text, making the description more vivid and complete. In *After Twenty Years*, synonym and near synonym are commonly selected by O. Henry to form relations, enlarge the vocabulary, and provide more helpful information. “[P]oliceman”, “officer” and “guardian” jointly point out the job of Jimmy, foreshadowing his choice of prioritizing responsibility over friendship. Descriptions like “my best chum, the finest chap in the world” and “the truest, staunchest old chap in the world” together reflect Bob’s deep affection towards his friend Jimmy, creating more tension before the climax of the story. Additionally, pairs of synonyms including “avenue” and “thoroughfare”, “doorway” and “door”, “funny” and “interesting”, “make my fortune” and “get my pile”, “heard from” and “corresponded”, “left” and “departed”, “alive” and “in existence”, “note” and “little piece of paper” avoid using the same

expressions but describe scenes and plots in various perspectives, thus efficiently enhancing the vividness and cohesion of the text.

On the other hand, antonym is also a lexical device to improve cohesion in this category, as they establish relations through contrastive but corresponding meanings. In this short story, there are two pairs of antonyms, one being “groove” and “razor-edge” while the other being “steady” and “tremble.” The first pair mirrors Bob’s confidence in the West and his sense of accomplishment as he had made a fortune with the spirit of adventure, which is in line with the prevailing values of that American society, while the second pair describes Bob’s responses before and after he knew about the truth, which integrally represent Bob’s sincerity and therefore manifest the tragedy through striking contrast.

### 3.1.3 Reiteration: Superordinate

The essence of superordinate lies in the connection between taxonomy and taxonomy names (Noprival et al., 2022), and each superordinate corresponds to its hyponym. In *After Twenty Years*, “diamond”, “scarf pin” and “handsome watch” are hyponyms of their superordinate “fortune”, which integrally reveal that Bob became rich and wealthy in these twenty years. Also, “restaurant”, “hardware store”, “drug store” and “cigar store” are hyponyms of the superordinate “business places.” It indicates that the author creates the environment in the story with specific elements, trying to provide readers with a sense of reality and meanwhile contributing to the cohesion of the text. Other hyponyms like “New York”, “Chicago” and the superordinate “city” are also tied to the social background and greatly improve the lexical cohesion of the text.

### 3.1.4 Reiteration: General Word

The use of general words is another lexical device to build connection, which involves the relations between specific and generic lexical items. In this short story, the phrase “moved up” in the first sentence presented a general picture how Jimmy went on patrol, but O. Henry provides specific description in the following part such as “trying doors”, “twirling his club” and “turning now and then”, showing a dynamic image of Jimmy as a guardian with detailed information. In addition, the general word “place” occurred 2 times, referring to “New York” and “the station” respectively. The first “place” served as a generalization of New York and indicated Jimmy’s positive attitude towards this eastern city with the phrases “the only” and “on earth”, while the second one created a suspense and a hint when Bob followed “Jimmy” to somewhere after they met at the appointed location, and later the specific phrase “the station” revealed the truth for the readers as part of the surprising ending. From this perspective, general words cannot be interpretable without some specific elements that can serve as supplements to convey unambiguous messages (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Meanwhile, specific words are complementary to general words, and both functions cohesively through mutual reference and then enrich the forms of expression of the short story.

### 3.2 Collocation

Halliday and Hasan (1976) discovered that discorsal cohesion can also be achieved when many sets of words co-occur in the same context. At the discourse level, collocation presents itself as collocational chains, providing valuable context clues and connecting lexical items from different dimensions. In *After Twenty Years*, there are several collocational chains under different topics, including the environment, the weather, Jimmy's behaviors and Bob's attitude, all of which improved the discorsal cohesion and developed the theme. Take the cold weather as an example, the lexical items that formed this chain involved "chilly gusts of wind", "a taste of rain", "a fine, cold drizzle", "the (risen) wind", "steady blow", "coat collars turned high" and "pocked hands." The chain formed by these lexical items points out the natural environment where Jimmy and Bob kept their appointment, directly creating a bleak atmosphere while indirectly reflecting Bob's valuing friendship. Such an atmosphere is in accordance with Jimmy's ruthless behavior and foreshadows the tragedy.

### 4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, O. Henry takes advantage of reiteration and collocation when composing the short story *After Twenty Years*, using repetition, synonym or near-synonym, superordinate, general word as well as collocational chains to integrate and organize the text in order to highlight the theme. These lexical devices linguistically connected different elements in the story, contributing to advancing the plot, constructing the environment, and shaping the characters. In *After Twenty Years*, the lexical cohesion does reinforce the aesthetic effects and thus contribute to its success.

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