

## Analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye* from the Perspective of Functional Stylistics

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**Abstract:** *The Catcher in the Rye* is the representative work of the American writer J.D. Salinger and his only full-length novel. With this novel, Salinger secured his place as one of the most prominent writers in 20th-century American literature. Over the years, researchers at home and abroad have primarily analyzed *The Catcher in the Rye* from a literary perspective, focusing on its thematic significance, character portrayal, and social value. However, studies from a linguistic perspective remain relatively scarce. As an interdisciplinary field combining linguistic and literary studies, functional stylistics emphasizes the exploration of linguistic forms and features in literary texts. Based on Halliday's theory of the three metafunctions of language, this paper analyzes *The Catcher in the Rye* at the lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels. By examining specific linguistic forms, it seeks to uncover the stylistic effects produced by these forms.

**Keywords:** *The Catcher in the Rye*; Functional Stylistics; J.D. Salinger

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 J.D. Salinger

J.D. Salinger is one of the most influential writers in contemporary American literature. Born in 1919 in Manhattan, New York, to a Jewish merchant family, he spent his teenage years in New Hampshire before attending New York University and Columbia University. In 1939, Salinger studied at Columbia University, and in 1940, he began publishing short stories. From 1942 to 1946, he served in the military during World War II, an experience that profoundly reshaped his worldview. Salinger rose to fame in 1952 with the publication of his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*.

#### 1.2 *The Catcher in the Rye*

*The Catcher in the Rye* is Salinger's only full-length novel and has attracted the attention of critics and readers alike since its publication. Written in the first-person perspective, the novel's protagonist, Holden Caulfield, is a middle-class teenager whose family and educational background closely resemble those of the author. The novel is deeply intertwined with Salinger's own life and upbringing, leading many to view Holden as a reflection of Salinger himself.

The book recounts nearly two days of Holden's experiences and emotional struggles after being expelled from school, as he roams the streets of New York City. Narrated in Holden's self-reflective tone, the story vividly portrays the mental anguish, restlessness, and alienation of a discontented middle-class youth, alongside the contradictions and complexities of adolescence. It critiques the hypocrisy and pretense of adult society while offering a psychological profile of a teenager torn by inner conflict. Holden is a quintessential example of a complex and contradictory adolescent. He possesses a pure and kind heart, a longing for a better life, and an idealistic pursuit of higher values. However, he is repelled by the insincerity and superficiality of the world around him. Despite yearning for authenticity and simplicity, he repeatedly encounters deceit and hypocrisy, which he feels powerless to change. This frustration and disillusionment lead him to a state of confusion, rebellion, and self-indulgence, culminating in his desire to escape reality and retreat to an isolated, silent existence in a remote place.

Upon its release, *The Catcher in the Rye* garnered widespread attention, as Holden's experiences mirrored the social realities faced by young people of the time. In 1950s America, many youths adopted Holden's style, imitated his manner of speech, and resonated deeply with his struggles, ideals, and frustrations. Parents and literary circles engaged in heated discussions about the book. Some believed it

offered valuable lessons, helping adolescents gain insight into life, recognize the darker sides of reality, and choose a path of self-respect. Adults, in turn, found the novel an opportunity to better understand the younger generation. However, others criticized the book as harmful, citing its portrayal of Holden as a poor student who smokes, drinks, pursues women, and uses profane language, leading to calls for its censorship. Over time, the novel has stood the test of criticism and has since become recognized as a "modern classic" in contemporary American literature. Today, it is widely included as required reading in both secondary and higher education curricula. As some critics have noted, it has profoundly influenced several generations of American youth.

## 2. A Functional Stylistic Perspective on *The Catcher in the Rye*

Functional stylistics, grounded in the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics, employs detailed linguistic analysis as a powerful tool to interpret textual meaning. It connects the formal features of literary texts with the social functions of language, exploring how evidence at the linguistic expression level conveys deeper themes through symbolic representation at the imagery level. Furthermore, it examines how this process operates and identifies the factors involved in its operation. Language is an encoded system composed of three levels: the semantic level, the lexico-grammatical level, and the phonological level [1]. Among the most influential contributions to the field of functional stylistics are Halliday's functional theories and analytical methods. Building upon these, Halliday developed the theory of foregrounding and proposed a three-level theoretical framework for studying language in art, providing practical tools and methods for analyzing literary texts [2]. The linguistic features of *The Catcher in the Rye* are particularly evident in its lexical, grammatical, and semantic dimensions, embodying the principle that "form is the realization of meaning" [3].

This chapter adopts Halliday's three-level framework of language in art to analyze the stylistic features of *The Catcher in the Rye* from a functional stylistic perspective. It aims to reveal the relationship between linguistic

expression and the thematic and symbolic representation in the novel. Systemic functional linguistics regards style as a "choice," suggesting that style arises from selections made within the linguistic system under the influence of specific situational contexts. Every choice is meaningful, and meaning lies in the act of choosing [4].

In systemic functional linguistics, the meaning expressed through language is classified into three metafunctions: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. This chapter begins with an analysis of the ideational function at the lexical level as expressed in the novel.

### 2.1 Ideational Function

The ideational function refers to how language reflects both the external world and the internal world, essentially representing what we commonly refer to as "content." For instance, in *The Catcher in the Rye*, when Holden discusses his attitude toward his school, he responds: Oh, God, Phoebe, don't ask me. I'm sick of everybody asking me that," I said, "A million reasons why. It was one of the worst schools I ever went to. It was full of phonies. And mean guys. You never saw so many mean guys in your life" [5].

In this conversation, Holden's feelings toward his school are revealed through the use of adjectives such as "disgusting," "worst," and "phony." The school symbolizes the corrupt and false world that Holden wishes to escape. In this adult world, Holden encounters all kinds of hypocritical individuals and witnesses the darkness and ugliness of society. Although Holden despises the pretentiousness of the people in this society, he is powerless to change these societal phenomena. Consequently, he resorts to acts of rebellion, such as lying, using profanity, and smoking, as a means of resistance [6]. Holden longs to find a world that is pure and innocent, where children can happily play games. However, when Holden describes the people he likes, the adjectives he uses carry positive connotations. For Example:

You never saw a little kid so pretty and smart in your whole life. She's really smart. I mean she's had all A's ever since she started school...She has this sort of red hair, a little bit like Allie's was, that's very short in the summertime. In the summertime, she sticks it

behind her ears. She has nice, pretty ears. In the wintertime, it's pretty long, though. Sometimes my mother braids it and sometimes she doesn't. It's really nice, though. She's only ten. She's quite skinny, like me, but nice-skinny. Roller-skate skinny [5].

From the above description of his sister Phoebe, Holden reveals his tender feelings for her. In a passage of ninety-two words, he uses fourteen adjectives to describe this ten-year-old girl, such as "small," "pretty," "smart," and "skinny." To Holden, Phoebe is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen in the world. She symbolizes beauty and innocence. Unlike the phony people around him, Phoebe is the only one who truly understands him. The comparison between the adjectives used to describe the school and those used for Phoebe clearly reflects Holden's preferences and aversions. The place Holden longs for is one filled with purity and innocence, rather than dirtiness, corruption, and hypocrisy. This desire explains why Holden wants to become the catcher in the rye.

## **2.2 Interpersonal Function**

Since language is used in the context of social life and interaction, whether through speaking or writing, it inherently reflects the relationships between individuals. Language allows us to establish and maintain various types of relationships. When we are with close friends, we may use affectionate nicknames, and our language becomes warm and intimate. When interacting with superiors, our language becomes cautious and professional. Conversely, when dealing with people we dislike, our language may become distant or even hostile. The interpersonal function of language reflects our social identity and status. First, let us analyze the interpersonal function demonstrated in the novel from the syntactic level.

For Example:

Once I started, I can go on for hours if I fell like it. No kidding [5].

The goddam movies. They can ruin you. I'm not kidding [5].

I have no wind, if you want to know the truth [5].

I'm a pacifist, if you want to know the truth [5].

She shook her head. I had her in a trance, like.

I really did [5].

I mean about calling certain guys bores. I don't

understand boring guys [5].

Some sentence structures, such as "No kidding", "If you really want to know the truth" and "I really did" are used repeatedly throughout the novel. These phrases represent a distinctive feature of Holden's speech, closely tied to the novel's themes. Holden aspires to be the "catcher in the rye," despising society's hypocrisy and falsehood. This reflects his interpersonal relationships—while living in a world full of pretense, Holden seeks sincerity, which sets him apart from the phony people around him. His frequent use of these sentences is a way of convincing others of his authenticity. He yearns to speak the truth, yet he is surrounded by falseness. Holden's intense dislike for the adult world is primarily reflected in his perceptions of adults. At the same time, it reveals the conflict and contradiction between the false external world and his inner world [7]. Holden wants to prevent innocent children from falling into the hypocrisy of adulthood and hopes to set an example for them, which is why he repeatedly uses these phrases.

In addition to the repetition of simple sentences, a large number of contractions frequently appear in Holden's daily speech, which is also a characteristic of spoken English. For Example:

Wuddaya---what do you [5] Oughta---ought to [5]

Willya---will you [5] Hellya---hell you are [5]

Letcha up---let you up [5] Come on---C'mon [5]

Holden hopes to engage in sincere conversations with others in this way, using very colloquial expressions. This also reflects his strong dislike for hypocritical pleasantries and his desire to live in a simple world. Holden desires to critique the world, but due to his personal limitations, he lacks coherent arguments and refined expressions. Instead, he perceives the world around him with a sensitive heart and articulates his thoughts in a candid and spontaneous manner using childlike language. Through his stream of consciousness and inner monologues, he gradually exposes the "hypocrisy, ugliness, and evil" that people have become desensitized to [8].

Next, we will explore the interpersonal function expressed through language at the discourse level in this book. The repetition of

grammatical structures allows the author to balance his material, create order, emphasize points, or make it easier for readers to grasp. There are three types of balance: parallel structure, contrast, and symmetry. Parallel structure involves arranging phrases or sentences with similar components and meanings in sequence. This rhetorical device is used to emphasize emotions or express rationality and can appear at different levels, such as in words, phrases, clauses, and sentence structures [9].

For Example:

It rained on his lousy tombstone, and it rained on the grass on his stomach. It rained all over the place. All the visitors that were visiting the cemetery started running like hell over to their cars. That's what drove me crazy. All the visitors could get in their cars and turn on their radios and all and then go someplace nice for dinner---Everybody except Allie [5].

This describes Holden visiting his brother's grave on a sunny day, when suddenly it starts to rain. As the rain falls on his brother's grave, Holden feels a deep sadness. The use of "it's raining" emphasizes Holden's emotions towards his brother. His brother lies alone in the cold grave, covered by grass and drenched by rain, which brings Holden down emotionally. However, his description of the other visitors shows his disappointment with them. When it started to rain, they all immediately ran off, never once considering their original purpose of visiting the grave. The visitors returned to their cars and began planning how to have fun. This contrast makes Holden view the visitors as phony. They don't truly care about the deceased; their visit was just a formality. People not only do phony things to the living but also to the dead. This is why Holden uses parallel structure to emphasize his disdain for the phony adult world. In the novel, Holden yearns for an innocent, fair, and nature-connected life, while despising the hypocritical relationships between people and the competitive environment of survival. He wants to escape this worldly life and live like a hermit, finding peace for his empty soul in nature's tranquility [10].

### **2.3 Discourse Function**

Discourse function, in simple terms, refers to the organizational function of language. This is

because language does not typically appear as isolated sentences in real-life contexts but rather in complete discourses, such as a spoken passage, a written paragraph, a full speech, or an entire book, all of which can be considered as discourse. Now, let's look at another example of parallel structure that appears in the novel.

For Example:

Girls with their legs crossed, girls with their legs not crossed, girls with terrific legs, girls with lousy legs, girls that looked like swell girls, girls that looked like they'd be bitches if you knew them. It was really nice sightseeing. If you know what I mean...You figured most of them would probably marry dopey guys that always talk about how many miles they get to a gallon in their goddam cars. Guys that get sore and childish as hell if you beat them at golf, or even just some stupid game like ping-pong. Guys that are very mean. Guys that never read books. Guys that are very boring-But I have to be careful about that [5].

Holden describes the girls waiting for their dates to appear in a bar. He also speculates about the type of men these girls will marry in the future. Regarding the girls, Holden clearly expresses his different views about them. He compares them, saying, "the girls with crossed legs and those whose legs are not closed, the girls with unattractive legs and those with beautiful ones, the great girls and those who look like sluts." His vivid descriptions of the girls reveal his desire for beauty. He has his own standards for a girl's beauty and hopes that a girl would be good, just like Phoebe, who is sincere and innocent. However, many girls are dragged into the false and dirty world of adulthood, which disappoints him.

When it comes to boys, Holden uses words like "dull, painful, immature, stupid, contemptible, boring," to express his negative attitude towards them. This clearly reflects Holden's pathological and sarcastic view of these boys. Holden employs parallel structure to show his intense feelings about these despicable and hypocritical boys. This discourse reflects Holden's belief that these guys are phonies. At the same time, Holden's descriptions of both girls and boys emphasize his longing for a more sincere and innocent world.

### **3. Conclusion**

Functional Stylistics is an interdisciplinary field that studies literary texts from a linguistic perspective. Its goal is to discover how the linguistic features in the text contribute to the aesthetic effects or artistic value of the work. The three metafunctions do not appear independently, every sentence and discourse simultaneously embodies the ideational, interpersonal and discourse functions, though the focus may differ in the analysis. This paper is based on the theory of Functional Stylistics and applies it to the study of the language in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. A detailed analysis of the language from the perspectives of lexis, syntax, and discourse has been conducted. This analysis helps readers better understand the thematic significance of the novel.

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