

Preface

I joined the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1981 as a lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature. At the time, Professor Edwin Thumboo was the Head of the Department of English Language and Literature, and also Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Professor Thumboo (affectionately called ‘Prof’ by his colleagues) is best known for his poetry, which has contributed much to the shaping and definition of Singapore’s English Language poetic canon, Edwin Thumboo has been called “the Father of Singapore poetry.”

Besides being Singapore’s “unofficial poet laureate”, Prof is also a visionary who appreciated the importance to Singapore of developing both the study of English literature and language. In those foundational years in the development of English studies at NUS, Prof invited a number of leading scholars in linguistics to visit, including John Sinclair (whose ground-breaking work in lexicography and corpus linguistics served as the basis for the COBUILD dictionary project), and M.A.K. Halliday (who pioneered development of Systemic Functional Theory in the discipline of linguistics).

It was while I was at NUS that I first became familiar with Systemic Functional Linguistics. But it was Ruqaiya Hasan’s book, *Linguistics, Language and Verbal Art*, which prompted my subsequent interest in applying a systemic-functional approach to the analysis of poetry, in particular the poetry of Edwin Thumboo.

In 1987, I left NUS to take up a position in Hong Kong. For my final lecture for the course I was teaching on sociolinguistics, I asked Prof if he would be willing to come to the class and read his poem, *Language as Power*, which he had written for Larry Smith and Braj Kachru (both pioneers in the development of World Englishes). Prof agreed, and when the day came, as we were walking to the lecture hall, I asked him whether, after reading the poem, he could explain the meaning of the poem to the students (mainly undergraduate majors in English language studies). He paused in his tracks, turned to me, and sternly replied, ‘you never ask the poet to interpret his own poem.’

Once the poet interprets his own poem, that interpretation becomes the meaning of the poem. Who could ever say otherwise? But, in the absence of the poet’s

own interpretation, whatever meaning I read out of (or into?) the poem remains always only my own hypothesis about what it means. Likewise for every reader; each sees—to paraphrase the poet—as each can, as each will. In Prof's *A poet reading*, the poet poses the question:

*Question: Is there difference if you've heard
This one before; or seven other people read
The same poem, if ever it's the same?
Which do you, he and she and I, hear or want?*

But then, this is—here quoting from Prof—*what releases the poem into a form of immortality*. Every time the poem is read, it means something new to the one reading it. It lives to mean anew.

Remembering that each of the analyses presented here is but my theory or hypothesis about what the poem means, my aim is to show in each instance how I arrived at my hypothesis, and hopefully offer some insight into the poet's craft that makes the art. My tools for this exploration into meaning are drawn from the workbench of systemic-functional linguistic theory.

Systemic-Functional Theory is explained in Chap. 1, providing the theoretical foundation for a step-by-step presentation of the methodology as applied to Prof. Thumboo's *Iskandar J. in His Studio*. The next six chapters each deal with a different poem: *gods can die* (Chap. 3) was the first poem of Prof's which I analysed; next came *David* (Chap. 4), which he wrote and dedicated to me; *Conjunction* (Chap. 5), which Prof wrote for the launch issue of the journal *Linguistics and the Human Sciences* for which I am the Editor; *A poet reading* (Chap. 6), which is my favourite and probably the most challenging to analyze; *Language as power* (Chap. 7), which he read at my last lecture in Singapore; and *Uncle never knew* (Chap. 8), which explores Prof's Chinese roots.

The more I study Prof. Thumboo's poetry, the more impressed I am with the artist's craft. Prof is never satisfied with his poems; he is always tweaking, always finding some way to say it better. As he says in *A poet reading*:

*The perfect poem is future tense. Meanwhile,
Neat incompleteness must suffice. Life goes on.*

So too, no analysis of the poet's work will ever be complete. There will always be something new to discover, some technique of the poet's which has been overlooked. Read these analyses as an invitation to you, to seek and to find meaning *waiting for release* (*A poet reading*).

Understanding Verbal Art

A Functional Linguistic Approach

Webster, J.

2015, X, 130 p. 49 illus., 10 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-642-55018-8