A Stylistic Way of Teaching Advanced English: 
An Analysis of Ships in the Desert

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Abstract: On the basis of stylistic theories, a new way of teaching texts in Advanced English is explored. Firstly, the paper introduces Advanced English course for juniors of English majors and one of the texts in it—Ships in the Desert. Then it elaborates on the stylistic way of teaching this course by analyzing the text at three levels of stylistic features, namely lexical level, grammatical level and semantic level, with the purpose being to prove that the new way has clear advantages in teaching Advanced English. The conclusion is that a stylistic way of teaching Advanced English is of great significance both to teachers and students, and to the improvement of syllabus.

Key words: stylistic way; stylistic features; stylistic effects; Advanced English teaching

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高级英语教学的文体学途径
—对《沙漠之舟》的文体学分析

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摘要：利用文体学理论可以找到高级英语教学的新途径。以高校英语专业三年级的高级英语课程中的一篇课文——沙漠之舟为例，该课文在词汇、语法、语义三个层面上具有明显的科技文体特征，产生了鲜明的文体效应，为探寻高级英语教学的新途径——文体学途径带来了启示。得出结论，通过文体学途径教授高级英语课程对教师、对学生以及对教学大纲的改进都有着重大的意义。

关键词：文体学途径；文体特征；文体效应；高级英语教学

1. Introduction

Advanced English is an important required course for juniors majoring in English. Traditionally, the teaching of this course has been carried out largely by means of explaining difficult words, analyzing complex structures, paraphrasing and doing the exercises, with little difference from preliminary Intensive Reading Course for freshmen and sophomores. The traditional way usually makes a dull, pointless class. According to the syllabus for Advanced English[1], teachers are supposed to guide them into appreciative reading of the texts instead of transferring language points and one - way comprehension of the texts to them. Faced with the situation, we would like to explore a stylistic way of teaching Advanced English by introducing a stylistic analysis of Ships in the Desert, one of the texts in it, with the expectation that the new method will bring fresh vitality to the classroom of

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Advanced English.

*Ships in the Desert*, a piece of popular scientific writing of 3540 words by Ac Gore in Advanced English[^2], centers on the relationship between man and environment. The author begins the text by introducing his search around the world for the causes of the environmental crisis. He points out that images of humankind’s assault on the earth are commonly seen almost anywhere. In analyzing these images, he finds that human civilization is now the dominant cause of change in the global environment. So the essential issue should be our relationship to the earth which has changed utterly. It is finally concluded that the real solution to the threat posed by human civilization and to human civilization will be found only in inventing and finally healing the relationship between civilization and the earth. In practical teaching, we focus on the stylistic features and their corresponding effects in the text, rather than just explaining difficult words, analyzing complex structures, and so on. The following is a detailed description of the method.

2. Stylistic Features

A situational variety of language can be seen as a complex of features describable by reference to a number of contextual categories. The categories, in turn, are defined with reference to sets of linguistic features distinctive of a situation, which operate at some or all of the levels of language. These situation-bound features are stylistically significant features—what we call stylistic features[^3]. As a text of popular science, *Ships in the Desert* shows us the stylistic features of popular science. The whole text manifests its stylistic features at the lexical, grammatical and semantic levels, as we will see in the following parts.

(1) Lexical features

Lexical features contain many aspects, including general wording inclination, connotative meaning or heavy stylistic coloring of certain words, etc. As far as this text is concerned, it shows us fairly conspicuously frequent use of technical and semi-technical words, unique use of non-technical words and expressions and frequent use of exact figures.

1. Frequent use of technical and semi-technical words

There are almost no highly-technical words in the text except the only one—“chlorofluorocarbons” which is rarely seen in common life.

Yet this is a piece of writing on “man and ecological environment”. So it is not short of technical expressions connected with ecological environment. They are: *inland sea*, *desert*, *glacier*, *atmosphere*, *carbon dioxide*, *polar ice cap*, *global warming*, *ozone depletion*, *deforestation*, *Amazon rain forest*, *ecological balance*, *necrotic cloud*, *methane gas*, *natural gas*, *landfills*, *coal mines*, *rice paddies*, *termites*, *biomass*, *green-house gases*, *water vapor*, *ultraviolet radiation*, *acid train*, *chlorine*, *human activities*, *heat-absorbing molecules*, *global climate equilibrium*, *winds*, *rainfall*, *surface temperatures*, *ocean currents*, *sea level*, *vegetative and animal life*, etc.

Semi-technical words in EST have meanings different from their non-technical use and thus find their place in this text: *condense*, *matter*, *frequency*, *constancy*, *concentration*, *pattern*, *distribution*, *force*, *strength*, *symptoms*.

By making particular use of technical and semi-technical vocabulary, the author presents us with a writing neither highly technical nor simplistic, neither too hard for the average reader to read nor too casual for it to be scientific. Thus this scientific writing is made popular. More importantly, it is these technical terms of ecological environment that center the theme on “why the environment is like this” and “how we should solve the environmental crisis”.

2. Unique use of non-technical words and expressions

In order to avoid the ambiguity or imprecision of more commonly used words with the same apparent meanings, the author tends to use words and expressions with meanings which are seldom used outside
EST\(^1\). For example, in the text, *images* is used instead of “examples”, *defined* instead of “characterized”, *established* instead of “accept”, *sustenance* instead of “existence”, etc.

All these words and expressions are precise, impersonal and formal. The author of the text endeavors to make impersonal, objective statements or observations on which all readers would agree. He is far more concerned with being accurate and concise than with giving variety to the way he expresses himself. And he tries to avoid any sort of misunderstanding. Hence his unique use of non-technical words and expressions rather than the use of more common words.

3 Frequent use of exact figures

Another evident marker of this scientific text is the exact figures adopted in it. In the beginning paragraph, there are numbers like “a fifty - ton catch”, “ten years ago”, “forty kilometers across the sand”, “more than a thousand miles away”. And in the second paragraph we have “in the late fall of 1988”, “the ice of two decades ago”. Other examples include “the 600 percent increase”, “during the last forty years” in paragraph 13, “200000 years ago”, “fewer than 250 million people”, “in 1776”, “to one billion” in paragraph 18, so on and so forth.

The advantage of listing numbers or statistics is clear to see. If we read “a big catch” instead of “a fifty - ton catch”, or “far across the sand” instead of “forty kilometers across the sand”, we will have a very vague idea of what ships in the desert are like or how tragic the scene is. Similarly, without the series of exact years and population recorded, we would have no idea about how dramatically human population is rising. So they play a crucial role in proving that the surge in population is both a cause of the changed relationship between human and the earth and one of the clearest illustrations of how startling the change has been. Therefore, these numbers work as historical proof and, though not directly, serve the theme of the text.

(2) Grammatical features

Under the category of grammatical features, such aspects as sentence type, clause type and group type are usually included. In the analysis of this text, we shall focus in particular on the following 5 aspects since the text does manifest these noticeable features.

1 Use of longer and statement - type sentences

Compared with other varieties, the sentences in the text appear longer. There are altogether 117 sentences; the shortest one consists of 6 words, the longest 82, the average being approximately 30 words per sentence. The statistics show that the sentence length in this scientific writing is longer than the sentence length in everyday conversation, or advertising or some urgent kind of news reporting\(^2\). The main reason lies in the topic and the content of the text. In general, long sentences are here employed to describe complex situations and relationships, to emphasize serious results and to express anxiety on the part of the writer.

Take the longest sentence for example. Paragraph 17, a one - sentence paragraph, consists of 82 words in itself. The author intends to reveal the two key factors that determine our relationship to the earth—human population and science and technology. To illustrate and stress the startling increase in human population, the author follows the first factor with *with the addition of one China's worth of people every ten years*. To show and warn the readers of how human civilization has been threatening the earth, he follows the second factor with even longer and more complicated illustration of *which has allowed an almost unimaginable magnification of our power to affect the world around us by burning, cutting, digging, moving, and transforming the physical matter that*
makes up the earth. The relative clause itself covers 31 words, which fully portrays how much power man has in transforming the whole world. Reading through the sentence at one go, we may sense the complicated relations between man and environment, and feel anxious about the world we live in.

As is the nature of most scientific writings, sentences in the text are mostly of the statement type except the rhetorical questions occasionally used. Statements are most popular in scientific writings mainly because they state the true situations about things. Thus the writing is made more informative, realistic and objective.

2. Occasional use of rhetorical questions

According to Xu [3], rhetorical questions can sometimes be found in public speeches and are used to give the audience food for thought and to impress them. However the text also contains several rhetorical questions, mainly in the eighth paragraph:

What should we feel towards these ghosts in the sky? Simple wonder or the mix of emotions we feel at the zoo? . . . But, without even considering that threat, shouldn’t it startle us that we have now put these clouds in the evening sky which glisten with a spectral light? Or have our eyes adjusted so completely to the bright lights of civilization that we can’t see these clouds for what they are—a physical manifestation of the violent collision between human civilization and the earth?

Here the author questions the reader’s attitude towards “noctilucent cloud” and invites us to think about our own power. Although these questions do not expect any answers, they really assert something that is known to the readers and can not be denied, directing the readers’ attention to the existing fact that the phenomenon is a manifestation of the violent collision between human civilization and the earth. Therefore rhetorical questions are employed as pervasive devices to appeal to the readers’ rethinking about what they’ve done to the earth and what they should do to save the earth. They also add a little emotional color to the exposition of the problem. In this sense, the rhetorical questions function in a similar way here as they do in public speeches.

3. Preference for impersonal subjects

By the study we find that more than 60% of the sentences of the text have “something” as the subjects. In the first five paragraphs, the author narrates what he saw and studied in the Antarctic and the Arctic mainly by use of sentences with subjects of “I”, “we” and “scientists”. In paragraphs 8 and 9, the author tries to invite us to think about our behavior by using a lot of “we” as the subjects of those actions. And paragraph 16 is of the same case.

Nevertheless, in the left 18 paragraphs, 70 out of the 73 sentences have “things” about environment as their subjects, for instance:

Paragraph 6: some of the most disturbing images of environmental destruction; the rain forest; more different species of birds

Paragraph 7: one; images that signal the distress of our global environment; the sky; you; this “noctilucent cloud”; they (these clouds); methane; all this extra methane

Paragraph 13: a new class of environmental problems; the 600 percent increase in the amount of chlorine; the increased levels of chlorine

……

A glance at these subjects tells us most of the text is devoted to exposition and analysis of environmental crisis and to solution to the problems between man and the earth. Besides, with these “things” as subjects, the writing is full of scientific exposition and reads more objective, persuasive, free from personal judgment like “I think”, “In my eye”, etc.

4. Wide use of dependent clauses and a high proportion of adverbials

The text makes wide use of dependent clauses, relative clauses being 40, adverbial clauses being 32.

Relative clauses are employed to give detailed or further information of the antecedents they modify. A noticeable example is in paragraph 7 where 6 relative
clauses occur. After each "image", there is a relative clause to tell what the image signals; *images that signal the distress of our global environment; another ghostly image that signals the loss of ecological balance now in progress...* Taken together, they make us aware of the fact that images of mankind's assault on the earth are everywhere and the degree is so severe that the whole ecological balance is disrupted.

"and if you are watching from a place where pollution hasn't blotted out the night sky altogether" indicates that because we have never stopped polluting the air, the night sky is going to be blotted out altogether. Without these clauses, the theme of "the way man relate to the earth" would be much less highlighted.

In some other instances, relative clauses add to clarity and economy of the expression, as can be seen in paragraph 13: *The increased levels of chlorine disrupt the global process by which the earth regulates the amount of ultraviolet radiation from the sun that is allowed through the atmosphere to the surface.*

The number of adverbial clauses contained in the text is second only to relative clauses. They function differently. Some of them are adverbial clauses of time, place or manner; some are of cause or result; some others of condition or concession. They are particularly used in the first few paragraphs of narration. Various kinds of adverbial clauses give an account of the situations of the narrated. As a result, fullness and realness are ensured in the writing.

In addition, what is distinctive about the elements of the sentence structure is a high proportion of adverbials, either of time or of place, either of purpose or of accompanying circumstances. In the text, most of the time and place adverbials appear at the top of the sentences while those of purpose usually find their place at the end of the sentences. This follows the normal rule of sentence pattern and adds regularity and ease for understanding. In this way, the scientific writing is made popular.

5 Wide use of the present tense

Present tense is mostly employed, including the simple present, the present continuous and the present perfect. When the author makes statements which are believed to be true, he uses the simple present tense. There are such universal statements as “*methane is released from landfills, from coal mines and rice paddies...*”, “*Global warming is also a strategic threat*”, “This increase in heat seriously threatens the global climate equilibrium that determines the pattern of winds, rainfall...”. Such kind of statements will still use the simple present form even when they are introduced by particular statements about the past or the future[3] (p.91), as in “*scientists established several years ago that in many land areas north of the Arctic circle, the spring snowmelt now comes earlier every year, and deep in the tundra below, the temperature of the earth is steadily rising.*”

In this sentence, we can also notice the use of the present continuous, which draws the reader's attention to a process or describes an uncompleted action and a process continuing. Other examples are “*But here, too, CO₂ levels are rising just as rapidly.*”; “*Acre by acre, the rain forest is being burned to create fast pasture for fast-food beef*”; “… which means we are silencing thousands of songs we have never even heard.”; “*we are ripping matter from its place in the earth in such volume as to upset the balance between daylight and darkness.*” The use of present tense here reveals that in spite of the fact that “the entire relationship between humankind and the earth has been transformed”, that “human civilization has usually had a large impact on the environment” and that “we have by now all witnessed surprising experiences that signal the damage from our assault on the environment”, we are still and once again adding to the threat of global crisis. This brings to light the real cause of environmental problems—human civilization has already transformed the whole earth and we are still destroying it. With all these facts and vivid descriptions, the consequences are self-evident; we are killing ourselves.

Past tense is not widely used in the text except
when something done in the past or a past state of things is described, such as the author’s search in polar areas and other places in past years and the description of population explosion on the earth in history.

Naturally, to prevent us from destroying the earth and ourselves, a solution must be found. Therefore, in the last two paragraphs, the simple future tense is employed. Here, the author is predicting the future and the only way to solve the problem between civilization and the earth.

As we all see, the text, based on past and present facts, makes scientific and objective analysis on the problems we have and suggests the eventual solution in the future. So, in it, past, present and future tenses are all employed, with the present tense being the major one. The whole writing thus reads comprehensive and convincing.

(3) Semantic features

According to \(^3\), the level of semantics concentrates on how the cohesive devices, paragraphing, discourse patterning, rhetorical devices and role structures contribute to the meaning of the text as a whole. In the analysis of this text, we just limit our discussion to discourse pattern, cohesion, collocation and the scarcity of rhetorical devices.

① Discourse Pattern

Although this is a long text of 3540 words, covering 14 pages, it has a very clear structure. It is structured in the way of “finding the problem, analyzing the problem and solving the problem”. What is worth mentioning is that the first two parts of “finding the problem” and “analyzing the problem” take 22 paragraphs while the last part of “solving the problem” only covers 4 paragraphs. This proves that the author takes great pains to expose and analyze the existing problems. At the very beginning, as the author introduces his research around the world, he exposes the fact to the readers that environmental crisis can be found all over the world; in the Trans – Antarctic Mountains, in the frigid Arctic Ocean and even at the equator in Brazil——simply covering the whole earth. Closely after the exposition, he digs these images up by the roots, classifies them and finds that human civilization is the dominant cause. Only after all this overall exposition and thorough analysis does the author try to suggest the solution by comparing the environmental challenge with military race — — that is, a careful reconsideration of all the factors leading to the problem.

A natural conclusion is based on comprehensive analysis. The final solution in the text also finds its basis in the overall study of the problem in previous paragraphs. The long part of analyzing the environmental problem is the main concern of the author, without which the solution would be powerless. Therefore, the general structure of the text follows the rule of being systematic and scientific and thus makes the argument logical and reasonable.

② Cohesion

Scientific writing aims at close and logical reasoning. Hence its dependence on strong meaning relations in content and clear explicit connectivity. The text presents us with a number of instances of the cohesive devices often used in an EST text. Most noticeable is the frequent use of co-reference, lexical reiteration, lexical collocation and transitional words or phrases.

A. Co-reference

Contrary to other varieties of writing, such as novels where there are much forward reference\(^{[1]}\)(p195), the text has much exploitation of backward reference.

Backward reference with use of pronoun it, they or them, the definite article the and the demonstratives this, that or these. For instance, in paragraph 7, “this noctilucent cloud”, “these clouds” and “And they should” are used to refer back to “a strange kind of cloud”. And at the end of the paragraph, “them” is used to refer to “the clouds”. Even in next paragraph where our attitudes towards these clouds are questioned, similar means of backward reference is employed again to refer back to “the clouds” in para-
graph 7, such as “these ghosts in the sky”, “without even considering that threat”, “put these clouds in the evening sky”, etc. It is not difficult to see that backward reference in the text adds economy, fluency and most importantly, coherence to expression.

B. Lexical reiteration

Lexical reiteration is a means of cohesion through the repetition of key words, the use of synonyms, near synonyms, hyponyms or general words. In paragraph 7, the word “cloud” is repeated 6 times and “noctilucent clouds” twice. In the following paragraph, which still centers on the topic of noctilucent clouds, the word “cloud” is repeated for another 2 times. The repetition of the key words helps the two paragraphs go closely around the topic— one of the images that signal the distress of our global environment.

As for the relationship between civilization and the earth—the theme of the text, it is formally raised from paragraph 15, acting as the central topic until the end of the text. So from paragraph 15, the word “relationship” occurs 21 times altogether. It is particularly repeated in paragraphs 20 – 26, 17 times in all.

The other two words that are repeated now and then are “global” and “strategic” which are also the key words of the text. In addition, “assessment” is repeated 3 times in the last few paragraphs because the author’s aim is to invite us to rethink about the relationship between civilization and the earth.

Apart from this, in paragraph 8, we can find the use of “global warming” which acts as the hyponym of “noctilucent clouds” and the use of “green – house gases” which is the hyponym of “methane”. The use of hyponyms reveals the nature of the clouds and the growing amount of methane, so that the main topic of this part is further highlighted.

C. Lexical collocation

Collocation refers to the habitual or expected co-occurrence of words. The meaning of a word depends on its immediate context— its nearby words which are called collocates. Moreover, collocation is one of the devices of lexical cohesion[4]. Therefore, collocation has its role in achieving semantic coherence.

In the text, a typical example of collocation occurs when the author comes to the category of “strategic conflicts” (referring to struggles that can threaten a nation’s survival and must be understood in a global context) in paragraph 11. Thus “global” becomes the collocate of “strategic” in the following paragraphs. In paragraph 13, some key words like “affect”, “global”, “disrupt”, “all” collocate with “strategic”; in paragraph 14, words like “global”, “worldwide”, “great”, “effect” collocate with the category “strategic”; and in paragraph 15 there occur “entire”, “affect”, “impact”, “lasting”, “pervasive”, “global” which collocate with “strategically”. They appear together in a specific context and are a recognizable feature of the register here. They are of the same lexical set and thus help reveal the major theme that the strategic conflicts between human civilization and ecological environment have so global, permanent and disastrous effects that we must change the way we think about the relationship between the two, or neither will survive.

D. Transitional words/phrases

The text does not lack formal transitional words and phrases. There is a phrase indicating logical sequence— “as a result”; those indicating contrast, such as “however”, “nevertheless”, “but”, “yet”, “but” being the most frequently used; one indicating additional statement— “in other words”; those indicating examples, such as “for example”, “to mention just one example”; those indicating order, such as “first”, “second”. These words and phrases can not be neglected in the author’s logical flow of expressions and play a positive role in forming a coherent text.

Scarcity of rhetorical devices

EST writings aim at impersonal, objective way of exposition. So clarity and accuracy is most important of their quality, and avoidance of ornamental or am-
biguous expressions is a must. That is why the text lacks variety with few rhetorical devices such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, etc. Yet there are occasional rhetorical devices which prove to be successfully used in the text – parallelism and analogy. One example of parallelism is “Methane is released from landfills, from coal mines and rice paddies, from billions of termites that swarm through the freshly cut forestland, from the burning of biomass and from a variety of other human activities.” in paragraph 7. Analogy is exploited twice when the author explains in military terms different degrees of environmental problems and solution to these problems.

3. Conclusion

In contrast with the traditional way of giving a class of Ships in the desert which can hardly integrate the theme of the text with the language, the new method enables a teacher to connect the form with the function successfully. Students will be able to find that features in style serve the theme in content. They will not only see that language is no longer separated from texts but also begin to learn the language at various levels rather than with the dull language points.

Above all, the authors of this paper have been teaching Advanced English for many years and have been employing the stylistic way for several terms. The result has turned out satisfactory. The class involves as many students as possible into it and takes on a new look of vigor and vitality. Students’ interest in the texts is aroused and their comprehension of the texts is enhanced so that most of them feel satisfied. It is a great change compared with the past situation in which both teachers and students felt teaching Advanced English a headache. In addition, this method will be equally significant in improving the syllabus since syllabus for juniors majoring in English is supposed to make the teachers aware that they should guide the students to appreciate and enjoy the learning of various texts.

As a way to explore innovation in teaching English, the method requires much more efforts of teachers for they must have a better understanding of the texts and relevant stylistic knowledge, and meanwhile more efforts of students since they have to prepare the texts well in advance. Anyway it pays to try. Thus the method can serve as a better way both for teachers and for students to deal with the texts in Advanced English.

[参考文献]


