

A Systemic Functional Grammar Analysis of Pecola Breedlove's Language as a Tragic Female Protagonist in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract. This study employed Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) to analyze Pecola Breedlove's language as a tragic female protagonist in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. While Morrison's work has been extensively analyzed through feminist and postcolonial lenses, limited research has explored how Pecola's language functions as a site of her oppression and marginalization. Specifically, the study aimed to examine Pecola's spoken dialogue by analyzing the process types within the ideational metafunction, mood structure, and pronoun usage within the interpersonal metafunction. Additionally, the study explored how her language reflects her identity as a tragic female protagonist. The results indicated a prevalence of mental and material processes, interrogative and imperative mood structures, and exclusive pronouns in Pecola's language. These linguistic choices depicted her as an emotionally and psychologically burdened character who lacks agency, emphasizing her vulnerability, desperation, and alienation. Together, these features contributed to the development of her tragic characterization. Through the exposure of how language encodes powerlessness, this study offered a fresh linguistic perspective on Pecola's tragic characterization and deepened feminist readings of *The Bluest Eye*. Future research can build on these findings by applying SFG to other marginalized characters in Morrison's works or across different literary genres, deepening the understanding of how grammatical structures shape meaning and representation in literature.

Keywords: Language; Pecola Breedlove; Systemic Functional Grammar; Toni Morrison; Tragic Protagonist.

1.0 Introduction

Published in 1970, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* delves into the themes of identity, beauty, race, and trauma. At its core is Pecola Breedlove, a tragic protagonist whose profound suffering, relentless societal oppression, and ultimate descent into madness encapsulate the essence of tragedy. Her journey mirrors the classic elements of a tragic narrative, including unfavorable circumstances, overpowering external forces, and an inevitable, devastating downfall, making her story deeply poignant and heartrending (Srivastava, 2023).

Despite extensive analysis of Pecola's victimization and marginalization by critics, there has been minimal focus on how her use of language serves as an indicator of her oppression and mental decline. Existing studies on *The Bluest Eye* primarily focus on Morrison's thematic concerns, narrative style, and characterization. For instance, a study by Al Mamun and Siddika (2020) examined Morrison's unique narrative techniques, highlighting her use of retrospective storytelling, multiple narrators, and manipulation of time and space. These methods significantly

influence the novel's plot construction and character development. Similarly, Kumar (2023) analyzed the distinct storytelling elements in *The Bluest Eye*, focusing on their impact on plot progression and characterization. The study emphasized Morrison's juxtaposition of characters from different racial and social backgrounds and her use of 'polyphonic' and 'multi-voiced' narratives to convey complex themes. These studies underscore Morrison's innovative narrative style and role in exploring complex themes and character dynamics in *The Bluest Eye*.

Given Morrison's careful attention to voice and discourse, an analysis of Pecola's spoken language offers critical insights into how her identity is shaped through linguistic structures. Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) provides a particularly valuable framework for this examination, as it allows for an exploration of how Pecola's speech encodes power relations, agency (or lack thereof), and psychological trauma. By revealing how language encodes powerlessness, this research provides a novel linguistic analysis of Pecola's tragic portrayal and enhances feminist interpretations of *The Bluest Eye*.

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), introduced by linguist Michael Halliday, underscores the significant relationship between language and its social functions. It emphasizes how language is utilized to demonstrate realities, establish relationships, and achieve specific purposes in different contexts. It also views language as a system of choices speakers employ to convey meaning. Therefore, in this framework, language is argued as a tool for constructing meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In his book, David Banks (2019) expounds that SFG conceptualizes meaning through three key standards or metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction concerns itself with three important aspects: the actions, events, and states that occur in the world, the participants or entities involved in these processes, and the circumstances under which they transpire. On the other hand, while interpersonal metafunction focuses on the relationship established between the speaker and his receiver or between the speaker and his message, textual metafunction emphasizes the importance of looking into how the message is structured and organized.

In analyzing literary texts, SFG can be utilized to explore how authors' linguistic choices serve specific functions within the text, achieving literary effects. This approach provides essential insights into how characters are established, themes are developed, and overall literary experience is molded (Bloor & Bloor, 2004; Gee, 2014). For instance, Rehan (2018) analyzed and compared two literary works—*Love* by D. H. Lawrence and *A Short History of Love* by Lawrence Stone—using Functional Grammar (FG) to highlight its effectiveness as a tool for literary analysis. Similarly, Bibi et al. (2023) applied the same framework to examine Kate Chopin's *The Storm*, focusing on identifying process types and circumstances within the text. Meanwhile, Ezz-Eddin (2024) investigated Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall*, analyzing the transitivity processes employed and their role in conveying ideologies, experiences, inner emotions, perspectives, and attitudes toward English society.

Notwithstanding its potential, the application of SFG in literary analysis remains relatively uncommon, as observed by Pasaribu, Sinambela, and Manik (2020), particularly in the study of Toni Morrison's works. Addressing this gap, the present study applies SFG to analyze the language of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. This paper explores how her linguistic choices, as seen in her spoken dialogue in the novel, reflect her identity as a tragic female protagonist.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed discourse analysis, guided by Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as conceptualized by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), to examine how language constructs and reflects social and psychological realities. Discourse analysis facilitates the exploration of linguistic patterns and their relationship to social power, identity, and meaning (Fairclough, 2013). Specifically, this study focused on Pecola Breedlove's spoken dialogue in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison to uncover the linguistic and social mechanisms shaping her tragic characterization. By applying SFG, this research examined how ideational and interpersonal metafunctions of language contribute to Pecola's portrayal and the broader thematic concerns of the novel.

2.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were drawn from *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. Only Pecola's spoken dialogue was included, particularly in key scenes that reveal her thoughts, emotions, and interactions with others. These scenes

were identified based on their thematic significance, focusing on trauma or social rejection moments. For example, dialogue during Pecola's interactions with her family and community members, as well as her internal monologues, were selected to capture the nuances of her character. Textual excerpts were extracted and organized chronologically to ensure systematic analysis. Examples included Pecola's dialogue in scenes that depict her yearning for blue eyes and her exchanges with other characters during moments of rejection. These excerpts were transcribed verbatim, ensuring fidelity to the original text, and coded for linguistic features relevant to SFG analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis

The analysis followed a structured approach based on SFG principles to address the research questions systematically.

Ideational Metafunction Analysis

Pecola's language was analyzed through the lens of the ideational metafunction, focusing on the types of processes (material, mental, relational, etc.) she employs. For example, her frequent use of mental processes (e.g., "I wish," "I want") reflects her internalized desires and longing for transformation. This step also examined how her choice of verbs, participants, and circumstances contributes to representing her inner world and external conflicts.

Interpersonal Metafunction Analysis

The interpersonal metafunction was explored to characterize Pecola's language, examining mood structures (e.g., declarative, interrogative) and pronoun usage. For instance, her first-person pronouns and modal verbs were analyzed to uncover her sense of identity, agency, and connection with others. Patterns such as hesitant or fragmented speech were noted, reflecting her emotional turmoil and marginalization.

Interpretation of Findings

Findings from the ideational and interpersonal analyses were synthesized to interpret how Pecola's linguistic patterns reflect her tragic characterization. Key areas of focus included her frequent use of relational and mental processes, which signal internalized trauma, and her limited use of imperatives, indicating diminished agency. The cultural and contextual significance of Pecola's language was also explored, emphasizing how systemic oppression and personal despair are embedded in her speech patterns.

2.4 Methodological Rigor

Established methodologies in SFG, such as Halliday's (1994) framework for analyzing metafunctions, were employed. Modifications included adapting SFG procedures to literary discourse by emphasizing thematic relevance and character development within the narrative context. Detailed coding schemas and criteria for scene selection were documented to ensure replicability.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

While this study analyzed literary texts and did not involve human subjects, ethical considerations were addressed by maintaining fidelity to the source material and respecting *The Bluest Eye's* cultural and historical context. Institutional review board approval was deemed unnecessary for this type of analysis.

2.6 Supporting literature

Prior research on SFG and discourse analysis supported the methodological choices. Studies by Martin and Rose (2007) on appraisal theory and Eggins (2004) on SFG applications provided foundational insights. Additionally, works by Morrison scholars, such as Kubitschek (1998), informed the interpretative framework, ensuring alignment with established literary critiques of *The Bluest Eye*.

3.0 Results and Discussions

3.1 Pecola Breedlove's Language through the Lens of SFG

Using the SFG framework, two metafunctional analyses—ideational and interpersonal—were conducted to explore Pecola Breedlove's language. These analyses focused on the types of processes, mood structures, and pronoun usage evident in her spoken dialogue.

Pecola's Types of Processes

Ideational metafunction is one of the three metafunctions proposed by Halliday in his SFG. This metafunction focuses on using language to represent ideas, experiences, and the world in general. Its key components include processes, which refer to the types of actions or states represented in language. These processes can be categorized into material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and causative (Banks, 2019).

An analysis of Pecola's spoken dialogue reveals that her language predominantly reflects mental processes. These mental processes, which pertain to sense, are vital for revealing her character's internal world, expressed through verbs associated with emotion (liking, loving, hating), cognition (thinking, knowing, noticing), and perception (seeing, hearing, tasting) (Gallardo, 2006). This is exemplified in the following lines:

"Am I going to die?"

Senser: "I" (Pecola, the one asking the question)

Mental Process: "going to die" (the mental process involved in this context is the fear or contemplation of death)

Phenomenon: "die" (the event or state being considered by Pecola)

How do you get somebody to love you?

Senser: "You" (referring to Frieda, the person Pecola is addressing)

Mental Process: "get" (the act of trying to obtain or achieve love)

Phenomenon: "somebody to love you" (the desired outcome or state that Pecola is inquiring about)

"And I thought maybe you could help me."

Senser: "I" (referring to Pecola, the speaker expressing her thoughts and desires)

Mental Process: "thought" (the act of considering or reflecting on the possibility of receiving help)

Phenomenon: "Maybe you could help me" (the proposition or idea that Pecola hopes Mr. Soaphead Church will assist her)

It is important to note that all mental processes involve two key participants: the Senser, a conscious being engaged in feeling, thinking, or perceiving, and the Phenomenon, the object or entity that is felt, thought about, or perceived by the Senser (Iwamoto, 2007). This framework is evident in Pecola's dialogue, where her words vividly convey her emotional and psychological struggles.

In the first line, Pecola expresses her fear and anxiety about mortality, revealing a deep contemplation of death and a profound sense of vulnerability. In the second, she seeks guidance on attaining love, highlighting her struggle to form meaningful emotional connections. The third line captures her yearning for assistance, underscoring her hopelessness and desperation for support. Therefore, by employing mental processes in Pecola's dialogue, Toni Morrison portrays the protagonist's inner complexities and conflicts, offering a poignant glimpse into her fragile emotional state.

The same is true in the study of Bibi et al. (2023). In *The Storm* by Kate Chopin, the portrayal of mental processes is essential in exposing the characters' internal thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of their situations. This psychological examination offers readers more insight into the characters' drives, longings, and inner struggles. By engaging the audience in the characters' subjective experiences, Chopin amplifies the story's emotional and psychological intricacy, enabling a more profound understanding of their lived experiences. This approach not only cultivates empathy but also emphasizes the complex ways in which internal thought processes influence external behaviors and interpersonal dynamics within the narrative.

In addition to mental processes, Pecola's language also exhibits material processes. Unlike mental processes, which pertain to sensing, material processes express concrete actions or events involving tangible entities. Hence, there is always an Actor (one who does something) in this process. Further, depending on the material process (if it is extended to something or someone), the clause may also contain a Goal (one to whom the process is 'directed') and/or a Beneficiary, which may be a Recipient (one that goods are given to), or a Client (one that services are done for) (Gallardo, 2006).

Notably, Pecola's most significant lines in the novel reflect material processes. In these material processes, Pecola is not the Actor but the Beneficiary, serving as the recipient of the action carried out by the Actors. This is illustrated in the following lines:

"Please, God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear."

Actor: The implied subject is God here, as Pecola speaks to God and requests action. Although she is the one making the request, the actual action of making her disappear is something she is asking God to do.

"Can you do it for me? ... I said, can you make me look different?"

"My eyes. I want them blue."

"Please... Please make me beautiful."

Actor: The person Pecola addresses, Mr. Soaphead Church (the one she is asking to help her), who appears to offer Pecola a solution to her deep emotional and psychological pain of being rejected and alienated.

An analysis through the lens of the ideational metafunction reveals that Pecola's language embodies a blend of mental and material processes, reflecting her inner emotional world and her interactions with external forces.

Pecola's Mood and Pronoun Usage

Within the framework of SFG, the interpersonal metafunction plays a crucial role in analyzing how language is used to facilitate social interactions, establish relationships, and express attitudes and emotions. In literature, this metafunction offers a valuable understanding of how authors and characters employ language to communicate, negotiate meaning, and engage with one another (McCrocklin & Slater, 2017).

Fundamental aspects of the interpersonal metafunction analysis are mood and pronoun usage. Mood, comprising the three primary types – declarative, interrogative, and imperative – reveals characters' attitudes, intentions, and interactions within literary texts. By analyzing mood, readers gain deeper insights into characters' motivations and how they engage with others, enhancing the overall narrative interpretation.

Pronoun usage, meanwhile, serves as a powerful tool for exploring the nuances of character interactions, social relationships, and narrative voice. It provides a lens through which the dynamics of power, solidarity, and identity can be examined, offering a richer understanding of the complexities in literary discourse (McCrocklin & Slater, 2017).

Pecola often employs the interrogative mood in terms of mood structure, as seen in her questions like *"Can you make me look different?"* and *"Why am I not beautiful?"*. She also frequently uses the imperative mood in her desperate pleas, such as *"Please make me beautiful"* and *"Please make me disappear."* Notably, Pecola's spoken dialogue demonstrates a marked absence of the declarative mood, underscoring her lack of agency and inability to assert herself confidently within the narrative.

Furthermore, in terms of pronoun usage, Pecola predominantly relies on first-person pronouns, mainly *"I"* and *"my,"* which are exclusive and reflect her deeply personal and individual experience. She rarely uses inclusive pronouns such as *"we"* or *"our,"* which profoundly reflects the disconnected character that Toni Morrison portrays in the novel.

From the perspective of SFG, Pecola Breedlove's language in *The Bluest Eye* is characterized by frequent use of mental and material processes, interrogative and imperative moods, and exclusive pronouns. Importantly, these linguistic features offer profound insights into her identity as a tragic female protagonist, a theme explored further in the next section.

3.2 Pecola's Language as a Reflection of Her Tragic Female Protagonist Role

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a masterful exploration of race, identity, and societal rejection, with Pecola Breedlove at its emotional core. Through meticulously analyzing Pecola's language, framed within SFG, Morrison reveals the layers of her protagonist's inner turmoil and external disempowerment. The ideational and interpersonal metafunctions of Pecola's dialogue not only illuminate her psychological struggles but also

underscore the systemic forces that render her powerless. By analyzing her speech's mental and material processes and her use of moods and pronouns, Morrison crafts a deeply tragic portrait of a girl yearning for validation in a world that denies her agency and belonging.

The ideational metafunction in Pecola's dialogue offers a profound lens through which Toni Morrison portrays the protagonist's inner struggles and emotional depth, emphasizing her tragic female role. Using mental processes, Morrison vividly captures Pecola's fear, longing, and desperation, which are windows into her conflicted psyche. Studies in systemic functional linguistics (SFL) highlight how mental processes often represent an individual's sensing and experiencing, revealing their inner world (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Pecola's language exemplifies this, embodying her constant negotiation between longing for societal validation and the harsh realities of rejection. This aligns with systemic linguistic research suggesting that characters with a predominance of mental processes are often portrayed as emotionally and psychologically burdened (Eggins, 2004).

Additionally, Pecola's material processes — actions done to her rather than by her — emphasize her role as a passive recipient. She is constantly depicted as the Beneficiary in narratives where others act upon or for her. This is consistent with the findings by Thompson (2014), which argue that material processes in literature often signify power dynamics, highlighting characters who lack agency. Morrison uses these processes to illustrate Pecola's inability to control her fate, reinforcing her vulnerability. Pecola's longing for transformation, epitomized by her wish for blue eyes, becomes a poignant symbol of her yearning for agency in a society that consistently denies it.

Pecola Breedlove's language further underscores her emotional and psychological state through the lens of interpersonal metafunction. The frequent use of interrogative and imperative moods reflects her vulnerability and desperation. Research on mood structures in literary dialogue demonstrates that interrogatives often signal a search for affirmation or belonging, especially in marginalized characters (Martin & Rose, 2007). Pecola's reliance on questions reveals her deep-seated insecurities and her plea for recognition in a society that marginalizes her. Imperatives, by contrast, convey her futile attempts to assert some control, reflecting her entrapment in a cycle of helplessness.

Moreover, the absence of a declarative mood in Pecola's dialogue signals her inability to assert her identity or claim her narrative. Empirical studies on language and power (Fairclough, 2013) support the notion that characters who lack declarative agency are often portrayed as powerless, reinforcing Pecola's tragic disempowerment. Finally, Pecola's repeated use of exclusive first-person pronouns (e.g., "I" and "me") isolates her linguistically, mirroring her social and familial alienation. This aligns with linguistic research emphasizing that characters who overuse self-referential language often reflect heightened isolation or marginalization (Toolan, 1998). Toni Morrison's linguistic choices in *The Bluest Eye* reflect Pecola's internal struggles, marginalization, and disempowerment. By foregrounding her mental and material processes and interpersonal language, Morrison crafts Pecola as a tragically vulnerable figure whose identity and agency are systematically undermined. These choices resonate with broader linguistic findings on power, identity, and representation, offering readers a profound understanding of Pecola's character and tragic narrative arc.

4.0 Conclusion

A discourse analysis within the framework of SFG reveals that Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* uses language characterized by the prevalence of mental and material processes, interrogative and imperative mood structures, and exclusive pronouns. These linguistic choices reveal her inner struggles, emotional depth, and psychological state, offering fundamental insights into her identity as a tragic female protagonist.

More specifically, Pecola's use of mental processes portrays her as emotionally and psychologically burdened, while her reliance on material processes underscores her lack of agency. Similarly, her frequent use of interrogative and imperative mood structures highlights her vulnerability and desperation, while her preference for exclusive pronouns reflects her profound sense of alienation. Collectively, these linguistic features contribute to the construction of her tragic characterization.

Indeed, employing SFG in literary analysis is vital for uncovering diverse aspects of the characters' identities. It effectively highlights how linguistic choices reflect their experiences, emotions, and societal roles, facilitating a deeper understanding of the literary text.

Moreover, within the broader context of teaching and learning grammar and literature, this study highlights the transformative potential of SFG in bridging both fields. It provides valuable insights into how linguistic structures shape and convey meaning in literary texts. The interdisciplinary nature of SFG helps bridge the gap between grammar and literature, enabling students to engage with texts more holistically. This approach cultivates a deeper understanding of how language creates meaning, equips students with critical tools for analytical interpretation, and encourages them to explore the interplay between structural elements and artistic expression. Ultimately, this comprehensive approach enriches the learning experience and prepares students for more advanced academic pursuits and creative endeavors.

To expand the application of SFG in literary analysis, it is recommended that this framework be applied to studying other characters in *The Bluest Eye* or across Toni Morrison's body of works. Such analyses can explore how linguistic choices reflect overarching themes such as race, gender, and identity, offering more profound insights into the complex interplay between language and societal constructs. Future studies could also broaden the scope of SFG by applying it to various literary genres, including poetry, drama, and non-fiction, to explore how different genres utilize grammatical structures for thematic expression and stylistic purposes. This broader application would enhance the understanding of how SFG functions across diverse forms of literature, further illuminating how grammar shapes meaning.

Finally, to fully leverage SFG's educational potential in bridging grammar and literature, it is recommended that educators actively incorporate SFG into both grammar instruction and literary analysis in the classroom. This integrated approach will help students recognize the connections between linguistic structures and their crucial role in shaping meaning within literary texts, fostering a deeper understanding of how language functions both as a tool for communication and as a medium for artistic expression.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

CAW – project administration, conceptualization, and research design; literature review and data collection, analysis and interpretation, writing and drafting, reviewing and editing; CO – literature review and data collection, analysis and interpretation, writing and drafting, visualization; MWR – reviewing and editing; JMS – reviewing and editing.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

All authors of this research declare that there is no conflict of interest about the publication of this paper.

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