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IT TAKES EIGHT TO TANGO.

A TEXT ANALYSIS SAMPLE

The present study is a sample of a text functional analysis. The article used to carry it out is “It takes eight to tango” by Pascal Wyse [previously published on the Guardian ® <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/apr/12/worldmusic.comment>].

IT TAKES EIGHT TO TANGO

by Pascal Wyse

It takes a special kind of insight to see that Morrissey, the famously morose former frontman of the Smiths, is at heart a tango musician. But Argentine composer and producer Gustavo Santaolalla, who is bringing his group Bajofondo Tango Club to Britain this week, asked Morrissey to sing on a track for the eight-piece band’s forthcoming album. Morrissey, he says, has got that “cosmic tango vibe”. “He’s doing a song I wrote a long time ago,” says Santaolalla. “There is a cosmic tango spirit some artists have, even if they don’t come from Buenos Aires. Tom Waits is a tango guy. Marianne Faithfull is kind of a tango girl. There’s an immediacy and melancholy implicit in what they do. In certain cases, such as Nick Cave and Morrissey, there is a deep sadness related to the spirit of tango. Nelly Furtado, who is also on the record, could really be a kind of suburban girl in Buenos Aires.”

You mess with tango at your peril. When Argentine bandoneón player Astor Piazzolla created “nuevo tango” by fusing it with jazz and contemporary classical, he suddenly found his boxing skills handy. “Piazzolla,” thundered La Mancha newspaper, “has dared to defy a traditional establishment greater than the state, greater than the gaucho, greater than soccer. He has dared to challenge the tango”. Fist fights and even death threats ensued.

Yet tango has actually been preyed upon by the influx of new music in Argentina since the 1940s. The Bajofondo Tango Club - like the French-Argentine group Gotan Project, whose 2001 album *La Revancha del Tango* was a worldwide hit - is following this tradition, this time linking tango to modern dance and electronic music. Santaolalla, for his part, has not been troubled with punch-ups from the old

guard - but he has been careful: "I've worked with some of the most famous traditional tango players. Some of the old guys can be offended if you go to them with new works and say, this is tango now. But I have never had a bad comment.

"With Bajofondo, we don't like the label 'electronic tango' because we try to make a contemporary music of Rio de la Plata [the river that forms part of the border between Argentina and Uruguay], music from Argentina, Uruguay. Obviously, if you want to do music that comes from there, or represents that part of the world, tango is going to be a part of it - but in our case, so is rock'n'roll, electronica and hip-hop. Hopefully, a new language, not pure tango."

Santaolalla wouldn't be easy to pick a musical fight with. He has won Grammys for his production work, forging connections between rock and folk music in Argentina, Uruguay and Mexico; artists on his label Surco won eight Latin Grammy awards in 2003: and, since turning to writing film scores a few years ago, he has won a Bafta for *The Motorcycle Diaries*, plus two Oscars, for *Brokeback Mountain* and *Babel*. Bajofondo Tango Club started in 2003 as an experiment. Santaolalla met with Uruguayan guitarist and composer Juan Campodónico, wanting to combine their musical heritage. "It was almost like a laboratory - bringing musicians in one at a time. It was probably 70% programmed [on computers and drum machines] and 30% played. Now it is 80% played, and the record we are finishing is all recorded as if live. I'm excited to be playing live again, on guitar. This band really made me feel what I was missing." The alchemy of some tango mixtures is strange. The bitter pride of men singing (to quote a famous tango song), "Woman, you dumped me in the prime of my life"; all that stabbing and huffing with the violins and bandoneón - it seems anathema to the crisis-free beats of lounging electronica. Perhaps it is this paradoxical state that makes the new tango sound so popular - caustic, vital passions viewed from a safe distance, or as a distant memory. And the scratching on turntables bears a resemblance to the trademark "Cicada" violin sound in Piazzolla's music. "There are timbres that are important, such as the bandoneón, double bass, violins, piano - but also the element of melancholy," says Santaolalla, "In our case, it is kind of an active melancholy. There's also power, rawness - a savage element to tango we try to keep alive. That connects to some of the primal energy rock has." As Horacio Malvicino, Piazzolla's guitarist, once said: "Just as jazz musicians must swing, tango has to have *mugre*, dirtiness. [A good tango] musician has to be dirty in their soul".

A text, either written or spoken, may be seen as a specimen of language, i.e. it is a particular realization of the various possibilities allowed by language. Therefore, in this respect, texts and language may be considered as the two ends of a same continuum.

There are, of course, different ways and techniques to analyze a text and we will use the one proposed by Michael Halliday.

Halliday's perspective should be called properly as systemic-functional analysis because every language realization is seen as a system and every single item in the system is considered according to the function it has rather than to the grammatical class to which it pertains.

As a system, a text can be therefore parsed in smaller and smaller units: in fact, it is made up of paragraphs, which are constituted by sentences, which can be parsed into clauses, which can be further split into groups and so forth until we arrive to the minimal (written) units of language i.e. morphemes.

Halliday's analysis is carried out on the basis of the function each single item has in the text: according to his point of view, in fact, a text is considered as a way to convey experience into language. A text, therefore, is considered as a multilayered system in which different levels of analysis can be carried out according to the fact we are inquiring its textual, interpersonal or experiential features.

The difference between a functional and a non-functional analysis is clear when we deal with the role of the subject. Having three different levels of analysis, in every single

clause we will be able to find three different subjects: the psychological, the grammatical and the logical one (whilst in a non-functional analysis only one subject was recognized).

The first level of analysis, the one dealing with the psychological subject, is the one which considers the clause as a message. In this case, each clause is divided into two parts: the Theme and the Rheme. We individuate the Theme in the clause by its position: whatever the situation is, the Theme is positioned at the beginning. Some authors use to call the Theme under the name of Topic but this is, at least, a misleading definition: in fact, we can distinguish three kinds of Themes, the textual (which can be realized by a continuative, a structural, or a conjunctive item), the interpersonal (which can be realized by a modal Adjunct, a relative or a Mood marking element) and the topical one (which is made up by one – and only one – element chosen among the Participants, the Process or the Circumstances). The first two, when present, do not cover in fact the whole thematic potential and are accessorially to the topical Theme. After the topical Theme has been expressed, the Rheme (containing the remainder of the clause) begins. The meaning of the Theme in the clause is very important because, being speaker-selected but listener-oriented, it represents the point of departure of the discourse, the item to which the speaker desires that the reader pays the utmost attention.

Themes can be marked or unmarked: in the latter case they coincide with the grammatical subject of the clause, in the former they don't, which means the author has

done a deliberate choice in foregrounding, before the grammatical subject, an element which would not normally occupy the first position in the clause.

What about the grammatical subject then? The second level of analysis considers the clause as an exchange between the speaker and the listener. Interweaving the roles they may have in the discourse (which may deal either with giving or demanding something) and the nature of the commodity exchanged (which may be either goods and services or information) we derive the four primary functions of speech, i.e. the statement, the question, the offer and the command. Considered as an exchange, a clause is analyzed in terms of its Mood and Residue. The Mood is made up by the grammatical subject and the Finite (or primary tense): what is not contained in the Mood constitutes the Residue. Recognizing the grammatical subject of a clause is very easy: in fact, it is that element which is picked up when we add a tag. As to the primary tense, it constitutes the first time reference, which sets firstly the sentence in the present, past or future. Generally speaking, in affirmative clauses, a primary tense is constituted by the first auxiliary verb (the remainder of the verbal group constituting the Predicator or secondary tense) but in two cases, the past tense and the simple present, it is conflated in a single word together with the secondary tense.

The third level of analysis deals with the experiential function: here the nature of the process is analyzed. In a general sense, we have two different kinds of experiences: the former is internal (dealing with inner processes of our consciousness) which is expressed

through mental processes and the latter is external (dealing with what goes on in the outer world) which is expressed by material processes. Besides, there is a third experiential process which puts different entities in relationship, a process of 'being' (as when we say 'Tom is the leader'). The above mentioned processes represent the main types but there are other processes which represent in a certain sense a way of fading from one process into the other: between material and mental processes we have behavioral ones (which deal with experiences occurring within the self which have a material counterpart), between mental and relational processes we have verbal ones, whilst between relational and material processes we have existential ones. It goes without saying that such processes should not be considered as lying as on a development line but rather as points on a circumference.

These three levels of analysis by themselves are not, of course, sufficient to carry out a proper text analysis since they are limited to the structure of a single clause: but a text is a system and as such it must have some peculiarities which connote it as a cohesive and coherent structure. A text, to be such, must present the features which are known under the heading of texture, i.e. reference, substitution (including ellipsis), lexical cohesion and conjunction. Besides, a proper text analysis should also give account of what are the relationships among the several clauses (taxis) as well as a proper phonologic consideration of the tone groups and other features not less important. Anyway, for sake of brevity, we will limit ourselves to analyze the text only in its

thematic aspects.

Thematic analysis

The text is made up of 5 paragraphs which are in their turn constituted of 42 sentences containing 113 clauses. The majority of the Themes (93%) are unmarked, although it is possible to note the presence of 6 marked Themes (clauses 20, 37, 46, 73, 94 and 104) and two instances of sentences having one or more clauses as Theme (sentences 50 and 63).

Paragraph one opens with a clause having an unmarked Theme, which introduces – in an impersonal way – clause three where we have a multiple Theme constituted by the continuative ‘*that*’ followed by the topical Theme ‘*Morrissey [...]*’. The Rheme relates about the Smiths’ leader passion for tango. Clause 4 opens again with a continuative ‘*But*’ and has the character of Santaolalla as topical theme, while in the Rheme we find again the name of Morrissey. Putting items first in the Theme and later on in the Rheme (or vice versa) is a consolidated technique used by authors to lead the reader’s attention from one concept to another. In the sentence 2 we can also note the presence of an embedded clause (n. 5) which introduces one of the text general Themes, i.e. the Bajofondo Tango Club ensemble founded by Santaolalla and reports that the Argentine producer has asked Morrissey for collaboration.

Sentence 7 opens again with the name of Morrissey: the clause which contains it (7)

reports the words said by Santaolalla explaining why the Smiths' leader has been chosen to sing an old Santaolalla's song, which is reported in clauses 9 and 10, that are projected by clause 11. Sentence 5 summarizes one of the main concepts of the paragraph (i.e. tango is not only for Argentine artists), although not particularly interesting from the thematic point of view, since it has an unmarked Theme. The following sentences elicit once again the concept already expressed, introducing in their Themes the names of other famous singers such as Tom Waits and Marianne Faithfull. Toward the end of the paragraph, in sentence 9, we find the first marked Theme of the passage (*In certain cases, such as Nick Cave and Morrissey*): here the author has foregrounded a prepositional group in order to draw the reader's attention on the fact that although tango isn't only for Buenos Aires artists, there are some foreign musicians who seem to have very deep connections to this kind of music. Sentence 10, the last of the first part of sentences of the text, has nothing relevant for thematic analysis.

Although not presenting relevant features from the thematic point of view when all clauses are singularly analyzed, the second paragraph draws our attention on clauses 25, 26 and 27 since, considering them on a level which is above the single clause, clauses 25 and 26 constitute the Theme of clause 27: two possible analysis can be carried out. The former (clause by clause) shows nothing special (all themes being unmarked and clause 26 being non finite), the latter presenting clause 25 and 26 as a Theme, whose Rheme is constituted by sentence 27: then, this is a device used by the author to draw the reader's

attention on the content he has foregrounded. The remainder of the paragraph is once again realized as a clause projecting another which reports a portion of text in inverted commas, in this case the menaces received by Piazzolla because of innovating the tango tradition as stated by the La Mancha newspaper. The paragraph closes with a non-agentive sentence, which has again an unmarked Theme and is perfectly symmetrical, in its meaning, to the one which opened the paragraph: it is dangerous to '*mess with tango*'.

The third paragraph begins with an unmarked multiple Theme realized by the conjunctive Adjunct '*yet*' and the topical '*tango*', which constitutes the real Theme of the passage together with Santaolalla and his Bajo Fondo. Despite what has been said before about the rigidity of tango tradition, its Rheme deals with the constant innovation in tango music since the 40s and the Bajofondo – which constitute the unmarked Theme of sentence 35 without doing anything different from what has been done in the past. Interestingly, sentence 37, although non finite, present a marked Theme ('*this time*'), used by the author to highlight on the time within which the mix between tango and modern music is occurring. Santaolalla occupies again the thematic position in sentence 39, which in its Rheme relates about the fact he has never received any trouble from innovating tango: nonetheless, the following clause (39), which opens with a multiple Theme (realized by the continuative '*but*' plus the topical personal reference item '*he*') projects the words relating his own experience. These final clauses, have all unmarked themes and introduce, from the content point of view, the concept that innovation should

be in any case respectful of tradition.

The fourth paragraph opens with a marked Theme, used by Santaolalla – whose words represent the whole content of the sentence - to elicit the attention on the group; the Rheme (whose grammatical subject is *we*, i.e. the Bajofondo). From a thematic point of view, sentence 22 is quite interesting since it begins with an interpersonal Theme (*‘obviously’*) and then continues with clauses 51 to 54 which constitute the Theme of clause 55. The sentence ends with clause 56 which has a multiple Theme realized by means of the structural *‘but’*, followed by the conjunctive Adjunct *‘in our case’* and the topical *‘so’*. The final sentence of the paragraph cannot be analyzed in a thematic perspective since it represents a minor process.

The fifth paragraph has again, as initial Theme, the musician Santaolalla, who can be viewed as the paragraph Theme, whilst he remains in thematic position – through a personal reference item – also in clause 60, whose Rheme refers of the prizes he has won. Later on, the thematic attention of clause 63 is focused on the artists he has produced, with the prizes they have received, which are mentioned in the Rheme. Clauses 64 and 65 are embedded in clause 63 and can be considered as the Theme of clause 65: here the author – who, in this part of the paragraph is focusing the attention on the multiple and all successful activities in which Santaolalla is engaged - has foregrounded his work as a film score writer, mentioning in the Rheme of this group the several prizes this activity deserved. Clause 66 focuses the attention back on the

Bajofondo Tango club, containing in its Rheme details about the date of its foundation. The subject is further specified in the clauses which follow: in fact, sentence 37 (having again Santaolalla as unmarked Theme) draws the reader's attention on the very act which gave birth to the Tango Club (Santaolalla meeting with Juan Campodonico). The author focuses more and more on the event reporting, in sentence 28, Santaolalla's words related to the memory of the musical experiment. This progressive focusing scheme continues in sentence 29 (which has an unmarked Theme and whose Rheme refers on the modality of playing the music at the time of the meeting). Sentence 30 opens with a marked theme; the author, in the preceding sentences has illustrated the genesis of the Bajofondo Tango Club giving details on the very foundation of the group and of its activity in the past. In clause 73 the writer wants to draw the attention on the fact that past customs have changed and therefore, to draw the highest attention of the readers on the time element, the circumstantial item '*now*' has been foregrounded to thematic position, while the Rheme emphasizes once more on the current activity of the group. Clause 76 introduces the first personal pronoun, referring once more to the Argentine producer, and emphasizes in its Rheme his pleasure to play live while clause 77 – which is unmarked as well – deals with the same subject in its Rheme.

In a certain sense, sentence 33 represents a change in the thematic choice since – although being unmarked – it moves the attention previously focused on Santaolalla and its group to a more general theme, i.e. the '*alchemy*' tango music may have: the sentence,

which is in fact a relational one, attributes to such mixture the feature of being, sometimes, strange. The strangeness introduced by the last adjective, which represents the Rheme of the clause, is further specified in the following sentence (n. 34). Here we can consider, in fact, clauses 81 to 85 – which, singularly analyzed, are all unmarked – as the Theme of the succeeding clause 86. The sentence, in its Rheme, focuses on the contrast between the regularity of electronic music and the unpredictability of playing live. The subject is dealt with again in the following sentence (35) which has a multiple unmarked Theme constituted by the modal Adjunct '*perhaps*' followed by the topical anaphoric reference item '*it*'; the nature of the process is relational and explains the probable reason for which the new tango is appreciated.

Sentence 36 (thematically unmarked) is used to highlight the fact that the Bajofondo Tango Club music has a slight resemblance to Piazzolla's. As he has already done so forth, once the subject has been introduced, the author specifies it further and further in the following sentences, also by reporting the protagonists' words. In fact, sentence 37 opens reporting Santaolalla's words projected by clause 93 (unmarked in Theme), which in fact constitutes the content of clauses 91 and 92 (which have unmarked Themes) and the latter elicits, in its Rheme, the importance of the presence both of several instruments and of the melancholy element. The latter element represents the topic of the following unmarked sentence (n.38) which specifies the nature of the group melancholy in its Rheme, which is defined as '*active*'.

Sentence 39 – which is unmarked as well – keeps on specifying, in its rhematic part, the nature of the Bajofondo Tango Club music, affirming that the group tries to keep alive the savage element tango has, which links, in some way, this kind of music to the same primordial energy on which rock music relies, as specified in the Rheme of sentence 40.

The closing sentences of the text, both with unmarked themes, corroborate the idea mentioned before, quoting the words of Horacio Malvicino, who asserts that music need to be ‘dirty’ or, to be more specific, musicians should have a ‘*dirty*’ soul.

FURTHER READINGS

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