

The psychological Journey of Seong Gi-hun in Hwang Dong-hyuk "The Squid Game" : A Cognitive -Stylistic Study

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Abstract

The current study is an attempt to uncover how the hero of squid game, a TV. Show written and directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk which is about hundreds of cash-strapped contestants (456 players) who accepted a competition of children's games for a big prize (45.6 billion). The linguistic analysis of characters' utterances in the series exposes how the hero is negatively and positively depicted. Appraisal is an element of a set of 12 classes of 'Social Actor Representation', an analytical framework developed by Van Leeuwen (2008). It occurs as the hero expresses positive or negative attitudes towards the other characters and the characters express such attitudes toward him as well. The results of the study show that characters appraise the hero and be appraised by him depending on their attitudes and their different perspectives. However, the hero is more negatively than positively appraised due to the abundance of negative attitudes which characters display they interact with Gi-hun due to his bad behavior. This, however, has changed when Gi-hun joined a team in the camp to protect themselves from the attacks of other teams.

Keywords: Social Construction, Cognitive Stylistics, Social Actor Representation, Appraisal, squid game , Seong Gi-hun

1. Introduction

People, in everyday life, construct their identities through doing some social interactions with each other according to Social Construction theory . This theory comes to exist when groups or individuals interact together within a social system and build "concepts or mental representations" about one's behaviors. They are adapted to suit any reciprocal roles played by individuals in connection with each other. The theory also provides visions into how people construct, create, modify meaning and integrate it into actions through the social interaction they do (Gergen, 1985:265). Adopting a critical discourse approach, the study investigates how the hero is socially constructed through linguistic mechanisms which are analyzed applying Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Representation SAR (2008).

Cognitive stylistics is one of the fields of applied linguistics and it is interested in offering a descriptive accounts of linguistic properties of texts in a mechanistic and non-evaluative ways (Stockwell, 2002:4-6). Stylistic analysis depends on linguistic frameworks or theories to predict interpretations. Cognitive stylistic, on the other hand, is a procedure that is systematically built on the theories which links the linguistic choice with a cognitive structure and process. It is providing a higher organized and explicit considerations of the relationships between the text on one hand and the responses and indications on the other (Semino and Culpeper,2003:1x).

Furthermore, Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) argue that cognitive stylistics takes into consideration the cognitive process through which a reader responds to certain indications of texts. It tries to grasp how the reader employs his/ her real life schematic knowledge in the interpretations of texts (cited in Patil, 2014:82-83). However, Analyzing individuals' utterances, one is able to uncover how they socially construct ideas, demote/ promote their ideologies as well as how their attitudes are shaped to influence their actions (Baker & Ellece, 2011:26).

Analyzing the Gi-hun's interactions will be carried out applying Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor approach to reveal his appraisements, ideologies and examine how he is realized linguistically by revealing potential underlying ideologies. As to the choice of van Leeuwen's analytical framework, it is triggered by the notion that through discursive interaction, individuals express their different perspectives, ideologies and attitudes which are examined qualitatively and

quantitatively in the present study. The selected theoretical framework has not been used to study TV shows before. As to the choice of "The Squid game" , it has to do with the fact that the text is ideologically charged and it is full of social aspects that approach social problems in a dramatic way.

2. Social Actor

Social Constructionism represents a position, a movement, theoretical orientations, theory, and approach. Generally, Social Constructionism has been modified and refined by some other disciplines such as: ethnomethodology, feminism, social studies of science, narrative philosophy and psychology. So, there is no particular social constructionist position is now more obvious . Moreover, some previous positions that do not recognize themselves as essentially social constructionists are sometimes labeled as such in this way, leading to some confusion (Stam, 2001: 294).

Hamed and Mohebkah (2016: 68) argue that social actors are those individuals who are engaged in social practices as the doer of practice (in the form of agents) or as receivers of the practice (recipients). They are represented through socio-semantic features. Social actors are objects or persons who are involved in a text in order to perform certain action or construct different situations whose ideologies and perspectives are revealed by various linguistic mechanisms found in their speeches. They are either agents or goals, addressers or addressee or individuals or groups. In discourse, social actor representation is related to the ways, in which, individuals, particular groups, or characters are classified, portrayed, and described from different angles such as ideology, age, gender, class, through which each social actor is identified.

One of the essential roles of the text is that it plays a key role in demonstrating social actors, that it serves to identify their identities and relations as well as show how they are represented in a text. The presentation of social actors deals with how particular social and political actors are depicted, characterized and shaped in discourse. Some social actors may possess more power in comparing to others in terms of shaping the meaning in the text (Bardici, 2012: 36). Carvalho (2000:7) names such effects as 'framing power' of social actor. To have the dominant framing power in relation to some issue is a significant form of social effect. Furthermore, Dashti and Mehrpour (2017:8) explain that by investigating how social actors are represented in texts, one could unearth ideology, identity, and power structures and their appearance in the texts.

3. Social Actor Representation (SRS)

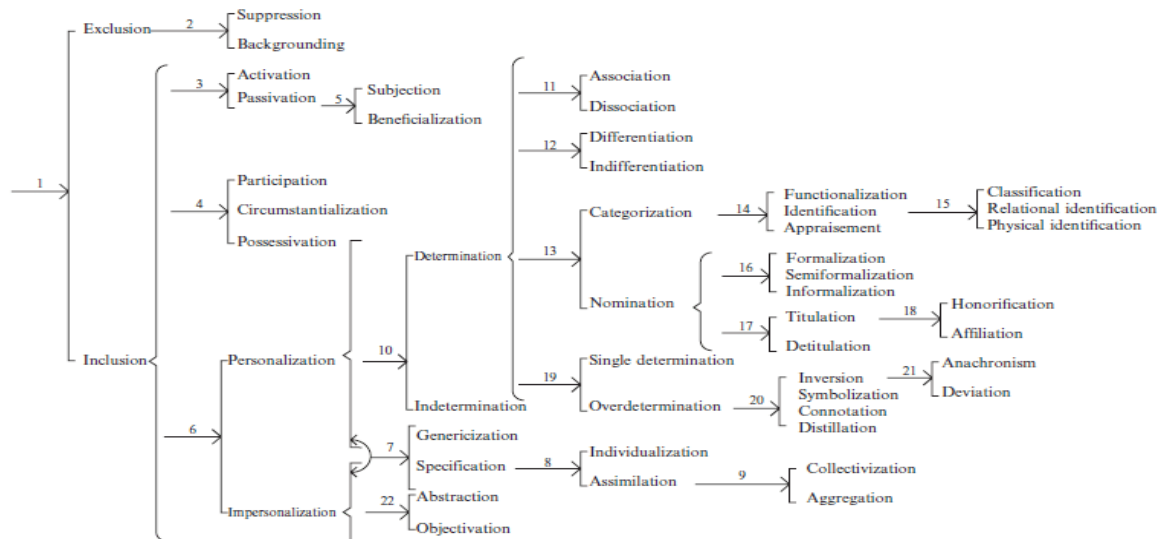
The 'Social Actor Approach', as Wodak & Meyer (2011:144) calls it, it is based on two assumptions: the first one is the lack of bi-uniqueness of language that can be realized in the way agency is analyzed; and the second is that meaning is culturally based (Abid, Manan & Amir, 2013:36 qtd. in Ali and Abdulkareem, 2017: 7), that is "*meaning belongs to culture rather than to language*". Therefore, it focuses on the social agent rather than social structure. Thus, Social representations could change the role or reorganize the social relationships among participants (van Leeuwen,1996:32).

Van Leeuwen (1993, 2008 and 2009a) describes his approach as 'a sociological grammar' and 'a socio-semantic inventory'. His model is affected through a range of sociological and linguistic theories. It is also based on various philosophers and scholars such as Bronisław Malinowski, Talcott Parsons, Basil Bernstein, Michel Foucault, Michael Halliday and Pierre Bourdieu. Van Leeuwen develops his analytical model (van Leeuwen, 2008:vii) basing on Bernstein's 'recontextualization', Foucault's concept of 'discourse' and Halliday's concept of 'register'. In 1993, van Leeuwen starts his first work into the CDA field through his Ph.D. thesis, then, he modified his model in 1996 describing it as "*The representation of social actors*".

In his, '*Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*' (2008), and based on his work in 1996, Leeuwen develops his model (SAR) which can be described as the way of how social actors are described critically and sociologically before studying how they are aware linguistically (van Leeuwen, 2008:23). This indicates that Leeuwen goes behind grammatical processes concentrating on socio-semantic concepts that deal with the semantic features of discourse such as 'appraisal' for representing social behaviors (Rycker, 2014:49). Therefore, the

SAR model, seemingly, depends on the sociological categories instead of linguistic categories (Waugh et al., 2015:84). However, Leeuwen represented social actors as humans who are characterized as participants in interactions and could be represented as subjects (agents) or objects (goals) in the clause (Baker & Ellege, 2011:133). Thus, actors are represented as a particular individuals or as kind of people that are located in a discourse (van Leeuwen, 2008:6). However, Van Leeuwen (2008:32) suggest a semantic framework which analyzes social actors according to a number of categories that are characterized as follows:

Table (1) Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Representation



4. Appraisalment

Van Leeuwen (2008:45) utilizes the word "appraisalment" to evaluate and appraise social actors as being "good or bad", "admired or pitied", "loved or hated". This social actor is recognized by idioms or nouns that indicate appraisalment such as "the darling, the bastard, the wretch, or thugs". Basically, words evaluate social actor whether negatively or positively.

Hence, social actors are considered as negative or positive (Van Leeuwen,2008:45). Linguistically, appraisalment is recognized via the words that denote a positive or negative meaning. These words are either nouns, adjectives or words that imply negative connotation that individuals use when appraising each other. For example, the following words which are taken from the text itself which are linguistically realized by nouns, adjectives, or words have negative connotations indicate negative and positive meanings.

Appraisalment in Squid Game

Squid game (in Korean language: 오징어 게임 (*Ojing-eo Geim*) is A Korean Netflix TV. Series released in the 17th of September 2021 composed of nine episodes presenting hundreds of cash-strapped contestants (456 players) who accepted a competition of children's games for a big prize (45.6 billion), but the stakes are deadly. In November of the same year, it became the Netflix's most-watched TV show, and the most watched series in 94 countries with 1.65 billion viewing hours in its surpassing for the title of most watched show. It is written and directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk who had tried to find a producer for his work since 2008. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squid_Game.

The present study tries to investigate the psychological journey of the hero ,Seong Gi-hun, who is a divorced chauffeur and gambler. Throughout the episodes of the series , Seong Gi-hun passed through obstacles and difficulties that set him face to face with death or loss of a friend. Such psychological pressure led him to have behavioral change that melt the shell from his heart to show his real metal. His social behavior was not moving in a straight line, rather, up and down curves were taking place in his social relations and appreciation. The adopted subtitle is in English language which is translated officially by Netflix Corporation, namely by Eun-Sook Yoon.

The characters as social actors in this Netflix series passed through different social interactions in the different situations. Seong Gi-hun processed variable evaluative expressions. These appraisements are in two types: positive and negative, and in two directions: uttered by him and to him. These could reveal the psychological and social status of the hero representing how he feels towards the other social actors and vice versa. The table below shows the recurrence of the appraising utterances produced by Seong Gi-hun to the other characters in the first five episodes:

Table (No. 1) The appraisal utterances produced by Seong Gi-hun to the others

Episode No.	Episode Name	Positive appraisalment	Negative appraisalment
1	Red Light, Green Light	20	36
2	Hell	9	31
3	The man with the Umbrella	35	5
4	Stick to the team	19	4
5	Fair world	7	15
Total		90	91

The table above shows the appraisal utterances said by Seong Gi-hun to the people around him. Dramatically, in the first episode, he produced the highest number of appraising utterances to reveal his social personality in which he produced (36) negative appraisements to show how miserable he is. They indicate his bad social image that led him to deal with the people and the situations in a negative way:

1. About a horse rider: "the stupid idiot, how could you lose with such a great horse"
This utterance was a negative appraisalment for the horse rider who he gambled on after he lost the race.

The positive appraising utterances were (20). Having a close look at these positive appraisements, it could be noted that they are said to describe his mother after stealing her money from her credit card, to his daughter who lives with his ex-wife, and to the boy who helped him to win a gift for his daughter in her birthday after he failed to buy her a one. Thus, although these appraisements are positive semantically, they reveal much more about his bad social behavior and distracted psychological status. He used such appraisements with his daughter, people in the neighborhood, a little boy, and criminals with him in the camp of the game. This is shown by the following example:

2. To his daughter: "You will be surprised"

3. To a boy: "great job, good work"

These two utterances above are positive semantically, however, they reveal his bad side once more. After telling his daughter that she will be surprised about the gift he will buy to her, the money that he won from gambling was stolen by a pocket thief girl, Kang Sae-byeok while he was trying to escape from the bets gang. The second utterance is said to a little boy who helped him to win a gift to his daughter which was a gun-shaped torcher which is not suitable for a little girl.

In the second episode, he uttered (9) positive appraising utterances only, which are said to his daughter who wants to travel to America with her mother and her father-in-law as well as to the old man in the game, Oh Il-nam who gave him a meal to eat:

4. To Oh Il-nam: "Sir, is this really ok?"

The negative appraisements are (30) which reveal that he got more psychological pressure that indicate his dissatisfaction of his circumstances that got him in a group of criminals in the game or getting back to his miserable life. Besides that, they indicate how he socially looks at the people around him who share bad reputation and ruined lives or being part of his bad luck. These are demonstrated in the following utterances:

5. To the husband of his ex-wife: "you bastard"

6. To Kang Sae-byeok: "Darn it"

In the third episode, he started to make friendships with some players to compose a team in the game. This got him to raise the number of the positive appraisements to reach (35) appraising

utterances said to the other players in the team, especially his childhood friend Cho Sang-woo and Oh Il-nam. Such appraisements show the psychological satisfaction of Seong Gi-hun as being accepted socially within a community of players who share the same affairs and care about each other to win the game:

7. To Abdul Ali: " it is my savior, I am glad to see you again, sir"
8. About Cho Sang-woo: " he was a famous prodigy in the neighborhood"
9. To Oh Il-nam: " you can be the sergeant major who served in the army his whole life."

On the other hand, there are (5) negative appraisements only, which he said to Jang Deok-su , a violent, sadistic, and condescending man and his team who try to bother Gi-hun's team.

In the fourth episode, the players started to work on killing each other out of the game when the lights were turned off. This led Gi-hun to say (19) positive appraisements to his team members who defend each other from the attacks of the other teams. The negative ones are only (4) which he said to Jang Deok-su who tried to kill his team members showing that he will be betrayed by his team:

In the fifth episode, the positive appraising utterances are (7) which are said to his team members especially Oh Il-nam while helping him to reduce his fever. The negative appraisements are (15) who he said about himself or the people who used to be around him while telling his story to player No. 1, Oh Il-nam. The way he talked about his past life reveals his attitude about what kind of men he was due to his circumstances.

Besides that, the other characters in this TV have said appraisal comments to Seong Gi-hun to show their evaluation and point of views about his personality and behavior. The table No. (2) below includes the positive and negative appraisements said to Seong Gi-hun in the first five episodes:

Table (No. 1) The appraisal utterances produced by the characters to Seong Gi-hun

Episode No.	Episode Name	Positive appraisalment	Negative appraisalment
1	Red Light, Green Light	6	40
2	Hell	3	38
3	The man with the Umbrella	12	1
4	Stick to the team	11	1
5	Fair world	5	4
Total		37	88

As shown in table No. 2 above, in the first episode, the positive appraisements are only (6). His daughter who sees him as a good father though her mother hates him, and an unknown person who liked the way he won in gambling says these positive appraisements. These indicate, in turn, how miserable he is since he cannot live with his daughter who gives him psychological stability and the gambler who says fake things about him because he cannot win money every time he gambles. On the other hand, the number of the negative appraisements are (40). This great number of negative appraisements gives a clear reflection of his social face as being insulted by almost everyone in his community starting with his mother and ex-wife and ending with the bets gang who he owed them a lot of money. This, as a result, is reflected on the way he describes and appraises others.

10. A gambler : "You ungrateful bastard"
11. The boss of a bet gang : " great job"

In Example No. 10, he was described by a gambler as " ungrateful bastard" because he cannot remember his mother's birthday. The next one is said to Gi-hun after being hit by the boss of a bets gang when he signed a document allowing him to take Gi-hun's kidneys if he failed to pay his debts and their interests.

In the second episode, hell, there are (3) positive appraisements said to him by player No. 1, Oh Il-nam and the police officer how did not believe his story about the game. Beside that, there are (38) negative appraisements said to him since he got back to his miserable life after the first game,

red light, green light. He is insulted by his mother, ex-wife, the bet gang and Kang Sae-byeok, a stoic and pocket thief girl.

12. Police officer: Okay, mister.

13. His ex-wife: "Don't you think you're too brazen?"

14. Kang Sae-byeok: "Aren't you too old to be that naïve or stupid?"

In the third episode, The man with the Umbrella, thirteen appraisements are said to Seong Gi-hun (12) of which are positive and (1) only was negative. The former are said to him by his team members especially Oh Il-nam and Ali Abdul, Player No. 199, a Pakistani refugee who rescued Seong Gi-hun in the first game, reflecting the social acceptability of the hero by the members of the team.

15. Abdul Ali: "I am glad to see you again, sir."

16. Oh Il-nam: "You must have been spanked by your father a lot when you were young"

17. Seong Gi-hun about himself: "My mom scolded me a lot because I always lost my umbrellas."

In the fourth episode, Stick to the team, Oh Il-nam, Cho Sang-woo and Abdul Ali produced (11) appraisements to Seong Gi-hun. This is done during the fight that took place when the lights were turned off. Gi-hun's team members were encouraging each other to survive this night. Seong Gi-hun played a good role in protecting the team since he stayed awake up with Oh Il-nam when the other members went to sleep. On the other hand, (1) negative appraisal was uttered by Jang Deok-su to threaten Gi-hun and his team.

In the fifth episode, Fair world, the major concern is centered on Hwang Jun-ho, a police detective who wants to find his missed brother by wearing the uniform of the staff members, a red suit with a circle on his head. Thus, only (9) appraisements were uttered to Seong Gi-hun. The positive appraisements which are (5) are basically said to Gi-hun while he was trying to help player No. 1 who was suffering from fever. While the negative appraising utterances are said to him while he was defending his team against the attacks of the other ones.

Conclusions:

The hero, Seong Gi-hun, is presented first as a very rejected social actor. This was clear through the social interactions he made with the others showing negative psychological pertinence with the people who are connected directly with his life such as his mother, beside those with less connectivity like the bet gang boss. This led him to receive and produce negative feedbacks. When he joined a team of players in the comp. he started to feel that he is not ultimately rejected socially though he was appraised negatively most of the time at the beginning of the events when he was suffering social loneliness and depression. He found himself appraised positively and appraising his community in the same way as well. This social belonging got him feel satisfied and accepted to act in a way that makes him acquire a better psychological-social status though he was in a great danger. Being saturated with the feelings of defending others within the team set him act positively and receive positive description. This might explain the sympathy of the audience with him after being seen as a very bad example of a social member.

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