

A Deconstruction of the three Linguistic Metafunctions: Holger Benkel's *Meißelbrut*

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Abstract

The three linguistic metafunctions posited in systemic functional grammar are deconstructed in Benkel's (2009) volume of poems *Meißelbrut* - both in the Derridean sense of an excavation of meaning and also in terms of reversing their construction. These metafunctions ordinarily perform the following tasks: the ideational describes events, states and entities; the interpersonal maintains relations with others; and the textual organises the message. However, Benkel's ideational meaning, rather than clarifying who does what and when, mystifies with paradoxical metaphors. Instead of maintaining the roles of writer and reader, the interpersonal is undermined by the absence of any fixed narratorial point of view and the audience is sucked into a swirling multiplicity that puts their own identity in doubt. Finally, the normal theme-rheme information structure is replaced by a textual chaos pointing both backwards and forwards, inwards and outwards. Benkel's aim is to break down our assumptions about 'reality' and challenge us to rethink all aspects of our identity by deconstructing - even decomposing! - the physical elements of humanity in a manner somewhat akin to Margaret Atwood. This paper will examine how he does so through each of the metafunctions in turn before summing up the effect they create when taken together.

Keywords: contemporary German poetry, deconstruction, linguistic metafunction

Introduction

In systemic functional theory, the lexicogrammar simultaneously realises three types of meaning: 1. ideational; 2. interpersonal; and 3. textual (Halliday 1985/1994). The ideational metafunction, firstly, realises 'our experience of the world, including the worlds in our own minds, to describe events and states and the entities involved in them' (Thompson 2004, p. 30).

The interpersonal metafunction, secondly, allows us ‘to interact with other people, to establish and maintain relations with them, to influence their behaviour, to express our own viewpoint on things in the world, and to elicit or change theirs’ (p. 30). Lastly, the textual metafunction organises ‘our messages in ways that indicate how they fit in with the other messages around them and with the wider context in which we are talking or writing’ (p. 30).

The metafunctions work together in text processing by a tacit agreement between writer and reader, based on an unspoken but cooperative ‘dialogue’ which entails the writer addressing questions that the reader might want answered. This can be demonstrated using a single clause. From the point of view of the writer, the interactive processing of the clause ‘she was sacked last week by Nat West’ may be paraphrased as follows:

The validity of the information I am giving you depends on your accepting that we are talking about something that happened to ‘she’; the validity I claim for the information is that it is valid for something in the past (not present or future tense), it is absolutely valid (not modalized) and that it is positively valid (not negative); and the information I want to give you about she is ‘sacked last week by Nat West’. As long as you accept the validity of the information in these terms, we can proceed to the next step in this interaction (Thompson 2004, p. 54).

Benkel’s *meißelbrut* sets out to problematise all three of these conventional meaning types. The tautological title itself (Schinkel 2009, p.1), consisting of the two words *meißel* (‘swarm’, translated as in all subsequent instances by the article writer) and *brut* (brood), immediately points up his modus operandi – the juxtaposition of incompatible elements often far removed from the popular meaning associated with them. Thus Benkel invites the reader to practise a Derridean semiotic deconstruction (e.g. Derrida 1974) to excavate the meanings of his poetry. If any lexical item may be said to have a core meaning upon which people would generally agree, the penumbra of extended associations around it is more controversial. It is this penumbra that *meißelbrut* inhabits, preferably at its outer edges. Nevertheless, Benkel is not extreme and does not reside in extremities. He hovers between them, flying back and forth, in an area where they can merge in new ways. His poems introduce the reader to a twilight world of *mystische Mischwesen* (mystical hybrid beings) (Drube 2009, p. 89) somewhere uncomfortably perched between new and old, beauty and decay, life and death, reminiscent of Margaret Atwood’s reducing women to a body or an animal, stripping away the surface of reality like skin.

Textual Meaning

It is appropriate that we should reverse the order in which the metafunctions are ordinarily presented, progressing from textual to ideational meaning, firstly because this corresponds best to the reader's initial access to the poems and, secondly, because it is in keeping with the thought and methodology of *meißelbrut*. Since Benkel consistently uses central alignment to format the poems, this collection consists graphically not of stanzas but of vague shadowy beings, some of which appear to be geometric, others animal, yet others anthropomorphic. These visual forms provide the reader's first impressions, reinforced by Sabine Kunz's woodcut prints, which accompany the poems in the publication and are themselves suggestive of monsters of the id. At least these should be the reader's first impressions for, in fact, when reproduced in academic articles (e.g. *Torso*, volume 40) the poems are not always faithfully reprinted in their original shape. Instead editors often align them leftward in the mistaken idea that they ought to 'tidy' them up. The best example of a shape that would be lost in this way is that of *tiere* (animals) (Benkel 2009, p. 14, translated in Appendix), which should resemble a creature walking upright with a large head, small torso and wide feet:

mensch der einst noch selber blinde kuh
 geschöpfe die er sprechen hörte zähmte
 rief als er gebot herab die höheren wesen
 darin schuf er den schlachthof das rohe in uns
 töten wir fortan die kreatur im eignen blut
 wie eine krankheit um die sünden auszulöschen
 wiederholen wir sie lebt die bestie rechnern hörig
 die gebären das andere subjekt den apparat
 mit tierischem instinkt regelt das tempo
 die räume des verkehrs der straßen
 in rudeln den hormonentrieb der systeme
 gehetzt von bauch und unterleib
 ist das geld der krieg eine symbiose
 die fremdes zugleich vereint und scheidet
 in der krippe des denkens sind lamm und kalb
 die beste nahrung essen wir embryos zuletzt
 und zeugen kadaver der natur im licht der sonne

vorverdaut kehren wir zur mutterbrust zurück
 werden die glieder durch tierhaut gezogen
 seh ich mein abbild an der wand
 lös ich mich von meinem schatten
 spring ich aus dem rumpf und frage
 wozu brauchen geister leiber wenn ihr kopf genügt
 schlag ich ihn ab sagt er mir das ende voraus
 greif ich nach den organen erwarten mich wächter
 in den himmeln glaub ich lebt kein wild ohne wagen

The poem's shape is not a random gimmick as it soon becomes obvious to the reader that Benkel is systematic in his rejection of certain aspects of conventional graphology. He uses no capital letters or sentence-based punctuation. The traditional visual distinction between nouns (with a capital letter) and other parts of speech in German - making proposition and predicate explicit - is immediately lost. Therefore, concrete and abstract, reality and ideal are symbolically merged. The grammatical structure of information is transformed into what Drube (2000, p. 42) calls *janusköpfige Syntax* (Janus-headed syntax) – linking at once backwards and forwards to evoke the multiplicity of reality. The effect is one of construction by chunking or layering, akin to collage or, perhaps, the early cubism of Braque and Picasso. Meanwhile, the absence of full-stops obliges the reader, who is struggling to process the concepts and gain an overview, to rush on to the end of the poem and digest the whole in one go.

The significance of this is explained in systemic functional theory: information is ordinarily structured by categorisation into either 'given' or 'new' and the distinction is brought out by its positioning within the clause. That which is familiar, given, or retrievable from the text is placed at the start of the clause, while unfamiliar material comes later. These two parts of the clause are referred to as 'theme' and 'rheme', respectively. While theme anchors a text, highlighting topic and indicating what the clause will be about, rheme comments on the theme (Halliday 1985, pp. 39-54). At a discourse level, themes and rhemes form links with the themes and rhemes of subsequent clauses to move the text forward in what is known as 'thematic progression' (Daneš 1974).

Benkel, on the other hand, does not employ theme and rheme. His poems, like his sentences, have no beginning or end. The disconcerted reader is thrown into a no-man's land without orientation, echoing *kindheit und kadaver's nirgends bin ich / gleichgültig die orte* (I am

nowhere / places are of no account) (Benkel 1995, cited in Drube 2000, p. 42), or possibly *fortsatz's ist ihr ort flackerndes licht* (her place is flickering light) (Benkel 2009, p. 22). Just as we are forced to re-consider what is 'given' in the poems' information structure, due to the negation of these written conventions, by implication the reader is invited to extend this rethinking to other socio-cultural assumptions. To sum up, then, *meißelbrut* does not present a 'normal' forward-pointing text that references itself or its immediate co-text and progresses coherently from given to new information. Instead, its intertextuality accepts no limits and juxtaposes Biblical and modernist styles as well as concepts. The poet is disillusioned with both East and West, with political Right and Left. In deconstructing our reality, Benkel's avowed intention is: *gegenwelten formulieren und die realität verändern... den wandlungswillen befördern* (to formulate anti-worlds and to change reality... to encourage willingness to change) (Drube 2000, p. 44).

Interpersonal Meaning

Interpersonal meaning regulates role-relationships in the social situation. In this respect Benkel has common ground with the novels of Margaret Atwood. Reacting against the conventional role of women, Atwood adopts an anti-essentialist approach through which not only the role of women but the most fundamental gender assumptions are questioned. Rather than an individual's experience being centred on a network of relationships that constitute her social persona, 'Atwood's first-person narratives construct the world as a text read from the perspective of the body' (Gadpaille 2008, p. 7). Women may be reduced to animals or bodies, sometimes causing social communication to break down, especially that between women and men. Benkel's poems do something similar but go further, deconstructing humanity itself. The human body may become animal, as in Kafka: *wachsen fühler mir wie hörner... nur noch ein panzer lieg ich...* (I sprout feelers like horns... lying there I am just a carapace...) (Benkel 2009, p. 6, *glockentier*) and one of the poems in *meißelbrut* actually bears the title *verwandlung* (metamorphosis) (p. 16), like Kafka's short story. Alternatively, the change can be more radical and the creature returned to its basic elements: *ein angehöhlter stumpf* (a partially hollowed out stump) (p.7, *lebensräume*), *ein fossil überleb ich* (I survive, a fossil) (p. 10, *flugschrift*).

Returning to Atwood, instead of presenting the female body as a thing of beauty within the patriarchal tradition of woman as object of desire, in 'The Edible Woman' (1969) she irreverently portrays a pregnant woman as a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon. She challenges the sacred ritual around motherhood in her description of Clara, the heroine,

making her ‘Medusa or mangel-wurzel, but never madonna’ (Gadpaille, 2008, p. 9). The closest parallel with Benkel appears in ‘Surfacing’ (1994), where Atwood narrates an ‘extreme negation of the female body’ (p. 10) when the heroine buries herself alive under earth and leaves. One possible interpretation of the book’s title is that of putting on a (false) surface, as when women make up their faces to conform to sociomediatic expectations. These layers of make up or clothes are duly shed along with their whole synthetic identity, as the narrator is stripped away, covered or disguised. So too, says Benkel, *lieg ich / wo die stille lebt bedeckt vom moos / dem fell der erde im feuer der natur* (I lie / where silence lives, covered in moss / the earth’s fur, in nature’s fire) (2009, p. 36, *wald*), as outer and inner landscapes are merged together.

According to Gadpaille (2008, pp. 10-13), Atwood has recourse to the following strategies, all arguably employed by Benkel: 1. Atwood camouflages the body with extraneous things, whether clothing, make-up or natural matter in the earth; 2. feeling that the real woman (if there is such a thing) barely exists under society’s trappings, she systematically erases to the extent that the woman disappears and only an unidentifiable creature remains; 3. she is seen through naïve or idealised metaphorical imagery, such as childhood photos in a scrapbook; 4. woman dissolves into a mere symbol of herself, as in *Lady Oracle* (1976) where Atwood’s heroine becomes, by metonymy, extremely thin and is suddenly confronted by her own monstrous thigh: ‘staring me in the face... It was enormous...’ (p. 126); 5. she is dismembered and reduced, for instance, to her legs alone; 6. by a form of displacement, her identity is transferred to that of a Barbara Ann Scott doll in ‘Surfacing’.

However, Benkel goes far beyond Atwood in deconstructing interpersonal meaning. Whereas Atwood’s women narrators do have relationships with others, the voice in Benkel’s poems is not merely outside society but beyond humanity, perhaps even beyond matter itself – a disembodied utopian dream, born of an extreme disillusion that has little hope in the interpersonal in any form. Benkel has been referred to as an ‘outsider’ (e.g. Hagedorn 1995, p. 1) and this does seem appropriate for the author as a real human being. On the other hand, for the speaker of *meißelbrut* it is utterly inadequate when the voice describes itself in the following terms, which clearly evoke a spiritual dimension: *werf ich die haut ab* (I discard the skin) (Benkel 2009, p. 21, *häute*), *erlöst vom körper* (freed from the body) (p. 24, *knochen*), *steigt der mensch über seinen leib hinweg* (the human being rises above and beyond his/her body) (p. 22, *fortsatz*), *bin ich ganz form im übergang* (I am merely form in transition) (p. 5, *meißelbrut*). Any trace of an interpersonal dimension is totally excised.

Ideational Meaning

The third and final metafunction of functional grammar that we shall examine - ordinarily considered the first in line of the three - is the ideational, which addresses our experience of the world. The problem in *meißelbrut* is that Benkel's world is not ours or, at least, not ours as we are accustomed to seeing it. Instead of depicting Actor, Patient, Goal and what is happening in the poem in a conventional narrative sense, Benkel constructs paradoxes. This is not a matter of playing rhetorical games with the reader, such as neglecting to give key details at the start of a passage in order to keep one guessing (as in crime fiction). It goes beyond non-narrating or mis-narrating, which might just blur or confuse the processes, to juxtaposing incompatible or opposite propositions, such that no narration is even possible.

Not content with merging dream and nightmare, or ideal with reality, Benkel imposes impossible choices on us, trapping the reader in an untenable position where we are forced to break out into some new way of thinking to make sense of the discourse. Despite certain aspects of romantic idealism, including an investigation of the dark side of the psyche, as symbolised in mining or tunnelling down into the earth to discover a magical underworld, this is not Novalis' *Hymnen an die Nacht* (Hymns to the Night), in which the narrator refuses to give up his love for his dead fiancée Sophie. Instead decay is embraced and death is celebrated for its own sake, as in *leg ich mich nieder zum liebesakt ins grab* (I lie down to make love in the grave) (Benkel 2009, p. 16, *verwandlung*) - not because it holds a loved-one in its jaws but because it is the only solution to the failure of humanity, the only gate to a higher form of life. It seems that unless mankind metamorphoses into something more noble we are doomed.

Therefore, the ideational metafunction of describing the world is left unrealised and *meißelbrut* is arguably a site for religious or hallucinatory visions, its narrator a mythical-real hybrid or a rotting corpse awaiting resurrection on Judgement Day. There is no story or, rather, the narrator has had enough of our human story and hopes a better one might replace it in the future. He is completely alone, referring to himself as *die einsame bestie* (the lonely beast) (Benkel 2009, p. 21, *häute*), and he has despaired of culture – *auf dem grundriss der bühne ist kultur nur noch dekor* (given our fundamentals, culture is merely decoration) (p. 41, *pflanzen*). The imagery is apocalyptic towards the end and the two final poems of the collection, *feuer* (fire) and *feuerprobe* (trial by fire), both include the word fire in their titles. The speaker has nothing to lose and so yearns for either renaissance - *überwinde ich meine natur* (I rise above my nature) (p. 84, *feuer*) - or revolution, in a reversal of the Biblical swords beaten into ploughshares – *der spaten verhärtet zum schwert* (the spade hardens into a sword) (p. 22,

fortsatz). The solution might be a form of baptism – *steig ich aus dem leib des wassers* (I rise out of the water's body) (p. 30, *suche*) – or it could be death – *saug ich nektar aus dem eignen leiche* (I suck nectar from my own corpse) (p. 46, *felsen*), but he is so desperate that anything appears better than this present non-life.

Conclusion

We can now return to the way the metafunctions work – or do not work - together, as demonstrated by our clause 'she was sacked last week by Nat West'. In Benkel's poems the point is precisely that they do not work together because the tacit agreement between writer and reader with respect to meaning has broken down and the message therefore appears to be something in the order of:

The validity of the information I am giving you depends on your accepting that we are talking about a narrator, but I refuse to tell you who that narrator is or even if it is animal, vegetable or mineral; the validity I claim for the information is that it may be valid at a particular time, but I shall not tell you which. It may or may not be valid and the information I want to give you (or may not want to give you) about this subject is paradoxical. Whether or not you accept the validity of the information in these terms, we shall proceed to the next step in any case (adapted from Thompson 2004, p. 54).

Disillusioned with everything under the sun, like Solomon in *Ecclesiastes*, the disembodied voice of *meißelbrut* flies like a disease-bearing insect (Benkel 2009, p. 10, *flugschrift*) over the ruins of a dying culture, linking up in its imagery with the metaphor of Life as a Journey (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), but with a dark romantic twist to it. To escape this journey of hopelessness, he dives into the bowels of the earth, plumbing the depths of his own soul. Physical and spiritual, abstract and concrete at once, he is in this regard not unlike Novalis, the most idealistic yet the most scientific of the German romantics. The speaker's ongoing metamorphosis can be read as a reassessment of social conditions or ways of living (Hagedorn 2006). The decay perceived in German culture, leaving the individual alienated and spiritually rotting in a void somewhere between socialism and capitalism, is mirrored in the physical decay of the natural elements described in the poems. But disillusion is not the end. In ugliness there is beauty, in death there is life, just as the inversion of linguistic norms allows a new

creativity of thought. Signs abound of a possible future rebirth of the creatures and hope of a corresponding renaissance in society: *kreist im mondlicht die musik des flusses* (the music of the river circles in the moonlight) (Benkel 2009, p. 33, *fluß*); *steigt der mensch über seinen leib hinweg... ist ihr ort flackerndes licht... in die zukunft...* (if mankind can rise above its body... the place will be flickering light... in the future) (p. 22, *fortsatz*).

To end with the words of Benkel himself, in discussion with Bergmann (2009):

ich biete ja gerade die völlige desillusionierung als ausgangspunkt der utopie an. auf die frage, welche aufgaben literatur haben könnte, sagte ich einmal, am besten sie hätte welche und niemand würde es merken ... für mich eröffnet kunst das nicht seiende und ist daher das vollkommen andere gegenüber der utilitären realität, antiwelt und alternative geschichte, und solcherart verwandt mit magie, mythen, mystik, alchemie, märchen, träumen, wahngebilden und einem postvitalen dasein... meine apokalyptischen gedanken [sind] bloss umgekehrte utopien. und ich bleibe dabei, gegenwelten formieren und die realität verändern wollen, das gehört zusammen.

The fact is that I propose utter disillusionment as a starting point for utopia. Asked which tasks literature should set itself, I once said that literature should ideally have goals but that no one notice them... for me art opens up potential and is therefore an anti-world, an alternative version, completely opposed to utilitarian reality. As such it is akin to magic, myths, mysticism, alchemy, fairytales, dreams, delusions and to an existence beyond life... my apocalyptic thoughts [are] merely reverse utopias. And I insist on this: creating counter-worlds and the desire to change reality belong together. Benkel in conversation, cited in Bergmann (2009, p. 5).

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Appendix

A possible translation of *tiere* (see above)

mankind himself once tamed blind cow creatures he heard speaking exclaimed as he commanded the higher beings to come down to where he created the abattoir our crude side henceforth we kill the creature in its own blood like a disease to wipe out our sins we sin again the beast is alive obedient to computers which give birth to the other identity the machine with an animal instinct which controls the speed of traffic in packs on the roads spurring on the systems' hormonal urge from stomach and nether regions forms a symbiosis of money and war which simultaneously unites and separates what's foreign in the manger of thought lamb and calf are the best food we eat embryos last and breed natural corpses in the sunlight predigested we return to our mother's breast our limbs pulled through animal skin I see my own image on the wall I free myself from my shadow I leap out of the rump and ask why do ghosts need bodies if their head is sufficient if I hack it off it will predict my end if I reach for the organs guards will be waiting for me in the heavens I think there are no wild animals without cars

Notes on Contributor

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