

# An Interpretation of Mending Wall from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics

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## Abstract

**This article provides an in-depth interpretation of Robert Frost's Mending Wall through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), highlighting how the poem's use of ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions enhances its thematic depth and engagement. The ideational function explores the wall's representation of both physical and metaphorical divides, touching upon its implications for human connections and social conventions. The interpersonal function probes the dialogue among characters, highlighting their divergent perspectives on customs and isolation. The textual function scrutinizes the poem's composition and tempo, underlining its dialogue-like quality and unified theme. By analyzing the poem's structure, dialogue, and symbolic elements, the study demonstrates SFL's efficacy in revealing the intricate relationship between language choices and literary interpretation, offering profound insights into Frost's contemplation of social barriers and interpersonal connections.**

## Keywords

**Systemic Functional Linguistics; the ideational function; the interpersonal function; the textual function.**

## 1. Introduction

This study aims to analyze Robert Frost's renowned poem Mending Wall from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Proposed by Michael Halliday in the mid-20th century, systemic functional linguistics emphasizes that language is not merely a tool for communication but also a part of social and cultural practices. The essence of systemic functional linguistics lies in its conceptualization of language as a network system with three fundamental functions: the ideational function, the interpersonal function and the textual function, focusing on how texts achieve their meanings and purposes in context. This theoretical framework provides a rich set of tools for analyzing how texts reflect the author's intentions, values, and social background through specific linguistic choices.

Mending Wall, published by Robert Frost in 1914, explores themes of boundaries, tradition, and communication through the narrative of two neighbors repairing the stone wall that divides their land in spring. The poem is widely acclaimed for its concise language, profound symbolic meanings, and subtle portrayal of interpersonal relationships. By analyzing Mending Wall through the lens of systemic functional linguistics, this study seeks to reveal how Frost's linguistic choices construct the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions, thereby deepening our understanding of the poem's themes and structure.

This paper begins with a review of the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics and the basic information and about Mending Wall, along with the research on it by scholars both in China and abroad. It then uses systemic functional linguistics to conduct a detailed analysis of the linguistic features and functional realization within Mending Wall. It explores how Frost articulates his contemplation on the relationships between the individual and society, through this short poem. Through this analysis, the study aims to demonstrate systemic

functional linguistics as a powerful tool for text analysis, helping us to comprehend more deeply the meaning and aesthetic value of literary works.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. An Introduction of Systemic Functional Linguistic

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as a theoretical framework for language analysis, was developed by Michael Halliday and emphasizes the social functions of language. Systemic functional linguistics proposes that language has three main functions: the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Ideational Metafunction concerns with the representation of experience and the expression of ideas. It deals with how language constructs and conveys information about the world. Halliday said that small children interacting with the objects around them we can see that they are using language to construe a theoretical model of their experience. This is language in the experiential function. (Halliday, M.A.K., 2003) The interpersonal function refers to the grammatical choices that enable narrators to enact their complex and diverse interpersonal relations. This tenet of systemic functional linguistics is based on the claim that a narrator not only talks about something, but is always talking to and with others. Language not only construes experience, but simultaneously acts out "the interpersonal encounters that are essential to our survival." (Halliday, M.A.K., 2003) Textual Metafunction concerns with the organization and coherence of discourse. It deals with how language creates and maintains meaningful texts.

This theoretical framework has been widely applied to the analysis of various types of texts, revealing how texts achieve their purposes in social communication through specific linguistic resources (Eggins, 2004). Scholars have utilized systemic functional linguistics to analyze a range of literary works, thereby deeply exploring the complex relationships among the themes, structures, and linguistic features of texts (Thompson, 1996). In abroad, Martin and James R pay attention to texts likely to be influential in the life of children and their gradual construal of their own world views with associated value systems with systemic functional linguistics. (Martin, James R, 2000) Christian M. I. M. Matthiessen applies systemic functional linguistics in healthcare contexts. He points to some ways in which systemic functional linguistics can inform investigations of contexts of healthcare, and our interventions based on the outcomes of such investigations. (Matthiessen, 2013) In China, Yang Xinzhang shows that the theory of systemic functional linguistics is useful in the analysis of multimodal discourse, and that the concepts of systemic functional linguistics can well explain and describe the operation mechanism of multimodal discourse. (Yang, 2009) Xin Zhiyin and Huang Guowen, explore the possibility of constructing an ecological discourse analysis under the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, through which it can evoke man's responsibility and obligation towards nature. (Xin & Huan, 2013)

In conclusion, systemic functional linguistics has been extensively applied across diverse text types and contexts, showcasing its broad utility in uncovering the intricate interplay between linguistic features and the social functions of texts worldwide. This wide-ranging application highlights systemic functional linguistics' capacity to elucidate complex thematic, structural, and linguistic relationships, as well as its potential in fostering a deeper understanding of discourse in various fields.

### 2.2. An Introduction of Mending Wall

Mending Wall is a poem by the famous American poet Robert Frost. This poem explores the theme of barriers and connections between people through the depiction of neighbors repairing a stone wall, an annual activity. The poem is divided into three parts. In the first part, the poet tells us that there are things in the world that dislike walls, causing them to fall and

create gaps. Hunters also destroy the walls, causing rabbits to run out from their hiding places within the walls. In the second part, the poet and his neighbor meet to repair the gaps together. The poet feels that there is no need for a wall between them, but the neighbor insists, "Good fences make good neighbors." In the third part, the poet analyzes why the neighbor says "Good fences make good neighbors," the necessity of repairing walls and building fences, and also explores whether the neighbor's concept is reasonable and appropriate for the times.

Robert Frost's *Mending Wall* is one of the iconic works of early 20th-century American literature, widely studied and discussed for its unique style and profound thematic contemplation. Zev Trachtenberg discusses this poem in the field of finance, and he thinks that this poem can help us see the complex ways in which property and community are intertwined according to the narrator and his neighbor different attitudes towards mending wall. (Trachtenberg, 1997) Al-Zubaidi and Nassier AG study this poem in linguistic aspect, and they believe that there is a prosodic code in which a selection of suprasegmental elements is deliberately and consciously changed, putting it in relation to syntactic structures, lexical choices. (Al-Zubaidi, Nassier AG, 2022) In China, Cheng Aimin combines structural analysis with rhetorical analysis to explore the deeper meaning of the poem, which reveals that one of the major themes of the poem lies in the ambivalence of human beings towards any natural or man-made wall and their yearning for understanding, peace and freedom. (Cheng, 2001) Niu Jianwei analyzes *Mending Wall* in terms of the poem's thematic idea, subject matter and artistic technique, and he believes that Frost's poetry has already had a strong modernist character. (Niu, 2005)

In summary, *Mending Wall* is a significant subject of analysis in both International and Chinese academic fields, spanning literature, linguistics, and other areas. Through such research, we can gain deeper insights into Frost's poem and the diverse interpretive and methodological approaches under different cultural and academic traditions. However, studies interpreting the poem using systemic functional linguistics are relatively scarce.

### **3. Analyzing Mending Wall from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics**

#### **3.1. Analyzing Mending Wall from the Ideational Function**

Language is used to organize, understand and express our perceptions of the world and of our own consciousness. This function is known as the ideational function. By examining the participants in the poem (the narrator and his neighbor) and their actions and language, readers can understand the different worldviews of the narrator and his neighbor, learn about what kind of people the narrator and his neighbor are, and the thoughts the poet wants to convey to the readers.

*Mending Wall* symbolizes communication and barriers between people through the annual ritual of repairing the wall. The wall in the poem is not only a symbol of physical obstacles but also reflects the boundaries set by humans at psychological and social levels. Frost delicately depicts the interaction between the two neighbors, with one believing that "Good fences make good neighbors", suggesting that maintaining a proper distance can preserve harmonious interpersonal relationships, while the other, the narrator, questions the necessity of this separation. The poet, from the perspective of practical use and necessity, believes there is no need for the wall between him and his neighbor. He thinks that repairing the wall and building fences between him and his neighbor is merely an outdoor game, with no significant value or meaning. The poet grows apple trees, and the neighbor grows pine trees; apple trees will not cross the wall to eat the neighbor's pine cones, and the trees they grow will not interfere with each other, causing confusion or encroachment. Therefore, the wall is unnecessary between the two houses.

The term “wall” recurs throughout the poem as a central image. Historically, walls have been significant symbols in both Eastern and Western cultures, gradually evolving into symbols of barriers between people, society, and nature. In Robert Frost’s *Mending Wall*, the concept of the “wall” serves as a multifaceted metaphor. It symbolizes not just the physical barriers that people erect between themselves but also the psychological and social boundaries that define and sometimes limit human relationships. (Tangyanpin,2017) The wall represents the tension between tradition and innovation, privacy and community, and the complex dynamics of neighborly relations. Through the act of mending the wall, Frost delves into the broader themes of separation and connection, questioning the necessity and value of the barriers that people maintain in their interactions with others.

Thus, the image of the narrator constructed by the poet is one of a desire for communication, and a critical attitude towards the invisible barriers formed between people due to tradition and customs. The neighbor’s image is shaped as someone who adheres to tradition, believing in the old adage that “Good fences make good neighbors.” This neighbor represents the adherence to traditional ideas and customs, insisting that boundaries are necessary to maintain good neighborly relations, even in the face of change and questioning.

Frost explores the necessity of boundaries between individuals through symbolic questioning of the wall, and how these boundaries affect interpersonal relationships and community cohesion. Through the dialogue and actions between the narrator and the neighbor, the poem showcases the importance of dialogue and understanding, as well as the possibility of re-examining and potentially restructuring these social and psychological boundaries. *Mending Wall* is not only an observation of the natural world and human behavior but also a profound reflection on broader social and cultural issues, reflecting Frost’s deep insights into human social structures and the relationships between individuals.

### **3.2. Analyzing Mending Wall from the Interpersonal Function**

In the realm of systemic functional linguistics, the Interpersonal Function scrutinizes the role of language in social interactions, encompassing how language articulates attitudes, establishes social roles and relationships, and influences the listener’s perceptions and responses. This domain involves the strategic selection and utilization of linguistic resources such as dialogue, mood, politeness forms, and modal verbs, allowing language to not only convey information but also express the speaker’s emotional stance, forging and maintaining social distances and power dynamics. Within textual analysis, the interpersonal function aids in understanding how a text, through its linguistic choices, mirrors the dynamic relations between the author and the reader or the speaker and the listener.

The study of modal verbs used in the conversation between the narrator and his neighbor allows the reader to understand the relationship between the narrator and his neighbor. The use of “will” as a modal verb indicates “necessity” an inference of the “inevitability” of a future fact. In line 27 of the poem, “my apple will never get across and eat the cones under his pines.” This is a good example of how building the wall is unnecessary and the neighbor’s worry is unnecessary because my apple will never get across and eat his pine cones. “Will” also appears in another line of the poem “he will not go behind his father’s sayings”. “Will” here shows that the neighbor is not just following his father’s last words, but is really sticking to his father’s ideas. (Cui Yanli, 2010) The first will shows that the narrator makes a promise that the disappearance of the wall will not make the neighbor’s interests suffer. The narrator is actively trying to improve the relationship with the neighbor and make the two families more tolerant of each other. However, the second will, and the neighbor repeated that “Good fences make good neighbors”, shows that the neighbors are traditional and old-fashioned. It is not easy for the narrator to make the neighborly relationship more harmonious. The word “could” in “if I could put a notion in his head.” In line 29, “could” is a modal that indicates a very small

possibility. The word “could” in this sentence indicates that the narrator cannot change his neighbor’s mind at all. (Cui Yanli,2010) It also implies to the reader that the narrator and his neighbor have a hard time getting closer to each other. Through this comparison, the poem explores the value of relationships, communication, and isolation, as well as the impact of traditional barriers on social interactions, inviting the reader to reflect on the complexity of social boundaries and human interactions.

### 3.3. Analyzing Mending Wall from the Textual Function

The Textual Function is an important concept in systemic functional linguistics, which focuses on how texts achieve communicative purposes and construct meaning through their structure and organization. This perspective emphasizes the layout of the text, the flow of information, and how linguistic elements work together to ensure that messages are clearly conveyed and received. The textual functional analysis of texts focuses on identifying and interpreting the coherence strategies, discourse markers, and other linguistic resources in a text that work together to form a coherent and unified whole, enabling readers to understand and interpret the author’s intentions and message.

The poet does not use rhyme at the end of the line, there is no fixed rhyme scheme. The basic rhythm of the poem is iambic pentameter, and there is no standardized rhyme scheme at the end of the lines. The blank verse is usually referred to as “the unrhymed verse of iambic pentameter”, and since one of the forty-five lines of the poem is not iambic pentameter, the poem as a whole belongs to the category of the poem, on the whole, should be regarded as a near blank verse.

Mending Wall is not divided into stanzas, and reads smoothly. The main reason for the fluency of the poem, apart from the use of words and phrases, is the effective use of the technique of enjambement. Sometimes words that are closely related to each other in meaning and grammar cross from one line to the next, and such a line is called an enjambment. This phenomenon is called ‘line-spanning’. The reader is not allowed to pause in the reading of the poem when a straddle occurs, because the “straddle” unites the two lines so closely that the lines flow unimpeded like water. The use of line breaks in many places in this blank verse enhances the flow of the poem, as well as the coherence and naturalness of its content. (Dong Wugang, 2019)

Analyzing Mending Wall from the textual function perspective involves discussing how Robert Frost achieves coherence between the poem’s themes and messages through its structure. The textual function focuses on the poem’s coherence, thematic progression, and the use of rhymes and rhythms to create a unified whole. In Mending Wall, Frost uses a conversational tone that mirrors the act of wall-mending, reflecting the back-and-forth dialogue between the narrator and his neighbor. This structure not only enhances the poem’s readability and engagement but also maps onto the exploration of physical and metaphorical boundaries. The use of blank verse facilitates the natural flow of dialogue, emphasizing the poem’s discussion on the complexities of interpersonal relationships and social boundaries. From this viewpoint, Mending Wall invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of maintaining barriers in human interactions.

## 4. Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of Robert Frost’s Mending Wall through Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) examines the poem’s ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. It explores how Frost uses language to express themes of barriers and connections, the nuanced dynamics between the narrator and his neighbor, and the poem’s cohesive structure. The ideational function highlights how the wall symbolizes physical and metaphorical boundaries, reflecting on human relationships and societal norms. The interpersonal analysis delves into the communication between characters, showcasing their contrasting views on tradition and

separation. Lastly, the textual function examines the poem's structure and rhythm, emphasizing its conversational tone and thematic coherence. This multi-faceted approach reveals Frost's critique of traditional barriers in fostering human interactions, urging a reflection on the complexities of social boundaries and the essence of neighborly relations.

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