LEXICAL CHOICES IN *"THE ROAD NOT TAKEN"*, A POEM WRITTEN BY ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyse the Lexical Choices in Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* poem from the perspectives of stylistics. Stylistics is the study of style of language in literature. It seeks to account for the interpretative effects of a text through close study of its linguistic detail, such as syntactic structuring, semantic deviation, deixis, modality, etc. A piece of work cannot be properly understood without a thorough knowledge of the language, which is its medium of expression. Each register has its own characteristics style with certain lexical and grammatical choices. Poets, particularly modern ones, have successfully freed themselves from constraints of what is so called "poetic language (Sharma, 2009: 31). In this write up, the value of the game considers the lexical choices in the poem *"The Road Not Taken"* by Robert Frost in the following categories: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, lexical categories such as synonymy, antonymy, contradiction and their significance or effects in the poem.

Keywords: Robert Frost, lexical choices, *"The Road Not Taken"*

I. Introduction

"The Road Not Taken" is a poem by Robert Frost which was published in 1916 in the collection Mountain Interval. Robert Frost was an American poet born in March 26, 1874. The title of the poem is often mistakenly given as "*The Road Less Traveled"*, from the penultimate line: "*I took the one less traveled by*". The poem was intended by Frost as a gentle mocking of indecision that has shown on many walks between him and his friend Thomas. *"The Road Not Taken"* is a narrative poem consisting of four stanzas. The speaker stands in yellow woods, considering a fork in the road. Both ways are equally worn and equally overlaid with un-trodden leaves. The speaker chooses one, telling

himself that he will take the other another day. Yet he knows it is unlikely that he will have opportunity to do so. This, he admits that someday in the future he will recreate the scene with a slight twist and with a sigh: He will claim that he took the less-travelled road.

The initial interpretation of the poem comes about as a result of looking at the words in the poem. It was not like thinking about the deviant grammatical and graphological elements. An examination of the lexical features will be a good place to start a more detailed linguistic and stylistic analysis.

From a grammatical perspective, the most fundamental way to categorize words is by part-of-speech. Alo, (1995:18) defined lexis as…."*the level of linguistic analysis and description concerned with the way in which the vocabulary of a language or a text is organized*". Lexical items help the writer to crystallize his thoughts, express certain emotions and create images all of which give a text its peculiar beauty. In this regard, writers depend on lexical items and their connotative implications, to convey their intended meanings. Therefore, the writer must choose the appropriate words to effectively convey the intended meaning and also achieve aesthetic beauty. This is inevitable because a writer must use linguistic resources imaginatively to have the desired effect or significant on the reader or audience. This explains why writers, particularly poets, make lexical choices with great care to achieve the delicate target of conveying meaning in the best possible way.

According to Brumfit and Carter (1986), the literary text is seen as self-sufficient as a language artifact, and as an object in itself. The critical point is that, the centrality of language in a literary text makes the study of the patterns of language use in this context quite fundamental and useful.

1.1 Contextual issues in the poetry

That language and context are two inseparable phenomena is a fact that has been long standing and established (Leech, 1983:13). Morley (1985:4) points out that, "*context serves to itemize those aspects of the situation which have a bearing on the form used*". The critical point is that context is an important aspect of language use. As has been demonstrated in the analysis of the texts, the true meaning of a text can be thought of as a relationship between its linguistic elements and whatever contextual evidence is available for clarifying it. In Robert Frost's poem, certain variables constitute the context of situation. These include: genre type, background experiences of the poet, and subject matter.

"THE ROAD NOT TAKEN"

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;   5

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,   10

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.   15

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.   20

1.2 Lexical Choices / Features

Giving a more precise definition of lexical choices requires making distinction between open-class words and closed-class words. Lexical choice can be categorized as the choice of open-class lexical items (whether phrasal patterns or individual words) appropriate to express the content units of the utterance being generated in a given situation of enunciation. Let us first of all consider the open class words in the poem. Open class words are those which carry the majority of meaning in a language (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs), as opposed to closed class words such as determiners (the, a, all etc) and prepositions (in, to, for etc) conjunctions (and, yet etc). Closed class words act like adhesive to a sentence and link together open class words in meaningful

arrangements (sentence) (Ling, 2009: 4) Table 1 shows how the open class words are distributed throughout the poem, and whether they are nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs.

Table 1

Nouns		Pronouns		Verbs		Adjectives	Adverbs	
roads	(2×)	I	(9×)	diverged	(2×)	yellow	not	
wood	(2×)	both	(2×)	could	(2×)	sorry	down	
traveler		it	(2×)	travel		fair	long	
undergrowth		that	(3×)	be	(2×)	better	as	(5×)
other		them		stood		grassy	far	
claim		this		looked		black	where	
wear		one		bent		first	then	
passing				took	(2×)		just	
same				having			perhaps	
morning				was			though	
leaves				wanted			there	
step				had	(2×)		really	
day				worn			equally	
way	(2×)			lay			how	
sigh				trodden			if	
ages	(2×)			has			ever	
difference				made			back	
				kept			somewhere	
				knowing			hence	
				leads			less	
				doubted				
				should				
				come				
				shall				
				telling				
				travelled				
21		19		31		7	24	

From the table it will be clear that the poet has used (21) nouns of which four (4) of them (*roads*, wood, way, ages,) have been repeated. He made mention of nouns such as roads, wood, traveler, undergrowth, other, claim, wear, passing, same, morning, leaves, step, day, way, sigh, ages and difference. Nine (9) of the nouns are concrete nouns and eight (8) are abstract nouns.

Table 2

Concrete/common	Abstract
roads, wood, traveler, morning, undergrowth, leaves, way, step day	claim, other, wear, passing, same, difference, sigh, ages

Road, wood, traveler, undergrowth, way, step, leaves can be seen and touch whereas *claim, same, difference, ages* cannot be experienced by any of the five senses. The difference between the concrete and abstract nouns is exemplified by the choice that the speaker has to make between two roads. The concrete shows the grief or regret because of the tangible one the person has taken. Whereas the intangible one is what the speaker, wish to have taken but did not. In life, the choices we make can affect us either positively or negatively. Inanimate nouns are predominant in the poem. For instance *roads, wood, undergrowth, other, claim, wear, passing, same, morning, leaves, step, day, way, sigh, ages and difference* are all nouns within the ambiance of non-human category. The pervasiveness of the abstract nouns in the poem could be said to account for what one perceives as indecisiveness of the persona in the making of choice. Some of the nouns (*wood, undergrowth, leaves,*) fall within the domain of natural things and they are all nouns relating to things on earth. Things on earth are but a stepping stone. Whereas nouns such as (*other, claim, same, sigh, difference*) fall within the province of abstract quality. Majority of the nouns (11) are count nouns (*roads, wood, traveler, undergrowth, other, claim, way, step, day, difference, leaves).* In linguistics, a count noun (also countable noun) is a common noun that can be modified by a numeral and that occurs in both singular and plural form. Significantly, they give an idea of number; whether plural or singular.

"*Undergrowth*" is a very significant word in the poem. It is essentially just bushes and vegetation that grows beneath the trees. This also is important, because it belongs with this line in the first stanza, "*to where it bent in the undergrowth*" which lets the reader be aware of the fact that the narrator cannot see what is on the other side of the roads, so he cannot be sure where he will end up either way. This can relate to the real life choices and decisions, because unless you have a crystal ball telling you where each decision will take you, one can never be sure of where you will end up.

Apart from the words belonging to the open class system, the poet used 19 pronouns (*I, both, it, that, them, this one*) of which "I" was repeated (9×), "both" (2×) "it" (2×) and "that"(3×).The predominant use of the pronoun "I" in the poem (in stanza 1, 3,and 4*) I could not travel both, I stood, I could* (in stanza 1), *I kept the first, I doubted, I should ever come back* (stanza 3*) I shall be telling this with a sigh, and I, I took the one less travelled* (stanza 4) make the poem seem too individualistic. The occurrence of this pronoun is designating the person speaking (I) to be excessively personal. A person has to take a

decision and own it. "I" is a personal pronoun which has a definite function in the poem.

In terms of the distribution, the verbs are the highest. There are (31) of them depicting the various process of transitivity and five (5) of them (*diverged could, be, took, had*) recurred.

According to Halliday and Matthiessen, (2004) the verb can be referred to as the process. The process is centrally important in what he refers to as clause as representation. Halliday refers to it as the system of transitivity. Transitivity is the overall resource for constructing goings on (experience). It means the kind of activity expressed by a sentence or a speaker, participants and the manner of participants. Halliday opines that there are six types of processes in the transitivity structure which include; material, mental, verbal, existential, relational and behavioural processes. And Frost uses these process types to convey his message in the poem. Material Processes (processes of doing): Verbs of action like *travel come, travelled, stood, took, kept, trodden, made* were used in the poem. Mental processes: processes of perception, affection, cognition (thinking, knowing) These are expressed by verbs of feeling, perceiving and thinking such as *knowing, doubted, want* which were used in the poem. Relational processes (being and having): verb like *having* was used. Behavioral processes: physiological and psychological, verbal and mental behavior: They were expressed by verbs such as *stood, bent, look, worn* which were used in the poem. Verbal processes: (processes of saying): the verb *telling* was used. Existential processes: These represent that something exists or happens verbs like *was, diverged, be, lay, had, could, has, shall, should, leads* were used.

Table 3

Material	Mental	Verbal	Existential	Relational	Behavioural
come, travelled, took, kept, trodden, made	knowing, doubted, want	telling	was, be, lay, had, could, has, shall, should, leads	having	worn, looked, stood, bent

The verbs connected with the speaker are (12) and they include (*could, travelled, be, stood, took, having, kept, knowing, doubted, come, shall, telling*). These verbs catapult the material, mental, verbal, existential, relational and behavioral processes and decisions that the speaker need to make ahead of him. The verbs which relate to the two roads are (8) and they are (*diverged, bent, was, wanted, worn, lay, leads, travelled*).

Table 4

Verbs related to the speaker	Verbs related to the two roads
could, travelled, be, stood, took, having, kept, knowing, doubted, come, shall, telling	diverged, bent, was, wanted, worn, lay, leads, travelled

The two roads are diverged or swerved, bent or twisted, which indicates that it will be fairly difficult to see what is ahead and chosen one will be a miserable decision in life. The verb "diverged" is very significant in the poem because it means to split into two different ways, which is important in regards to the roads. Had they just been two straight roads, they would have most likely gone off in the same direction, and there wouldn't really be any choice, since these two roads go off in different directions, their ending-up points would be different therefore making there be a choice between two roads that appear the same. "*Trodden*" is the past tense form of tread. While "*tread*" simply means to step on something crushing whatever it is one is walking on is the definition, the importance of the word Trodden is the fact that it's in past tense. Amongst other words in this poem in the first three stanza's, for example, in stanza one, all verbs are in past tense, (diverged, stood, looked) as they are in stanza two (took, was, wanted, had, worn) and stanza three (trodden, doubted). However, in the fourth stanza the tense changes to future, (shall, telling (progressive)) to give us the speculation that the narrator is, in fact, at the same place he was in the beginning. He has probably made no choice, and knows he'll regret not making a choice later.

However, he knows he can't since he is paralyzed by the fear of the wrong choice of the two similar things…. Roads. The following verbs (*travel, lay, come*) were used in their bare or base form and they are also used in the present tense. They signify the choice that the person seemed to have made in the present but failed. Again, the poet used these verbs (*diverged, stood, looked bent, was, wanted, had, has, worn, trodden, made, kept doubted, travelled*) in the past. They also connote the choice or decision that the person made. In addition, all these verbs which are in the past are marked for tense in the poem (finite verbs), except for the verbs in the first and last lines of the last stanza, i.e. '*shall be telling*' and '*has made*'. A finite verb is a form of a verb that has a subject (expressed or implied) and can function as the root of an independent clause. The Verbs can be classified according to their valency or the number of arguments that they take. Majority of the verbs have trivalent valency – that is the verb has a subject, a direct object, and an indirect object. For example: *I kept the first for another day (stanza 3 line 3), I took the one less travelled by* (stanza 4 line 4) Three of the verbs (*having, knowing, telling*) are all in the progressive form. The speaker is regarded as *having perhaps the better claim, knowing how way leads on to way*, yet he is stacked with indecision and regrets and later on *be telling this with a sigh somewhere and ages*. This is significantly clear that the

speaker's personal or self-reflection on what he did or did not select in the past and on what has resulted in is very paramount. Thus, it contributes the idea that choice is inevitable but he never knows what his choice means until he has lived it.

The adjectives are used to describe or qualify things in the poem. There were seven (7) adjectives which were used (*yellow, sorry, fair, better, first, grassy, black*). Two (2) of the adjectives (*yellow, black*) are for colour. Two (2) of them 'fair' and 'better' are adjectives of quality. '*Grassy*' is an adjective of touch whereas '*first*' is an adjective of number which deals with position. The speaker is traveling in a "*yellow*" wood. Yellow is positively regarded as something for gold, hope, perseverance, happiness, and so forth. This high spirited tone is consistent throughout the poem. With that in mind, it is not wrong for the reader to regard the "*sigh*" as a contented "*sigh*". Negatively, yellow can be seen as irrationality, fear, emotional fragility, depression, anxiety, suicidal etc. This can also show the speaker is *doubted if he should ever come back* in stanza 3 last line. "*Yellow*" is a word that should be looked at in the poem. Not because it's a mere vocabulary word, but because this word carries a symbol along with it for the poem. When a wood is yellow, it is a representation that there is obviously (dry) leaves on the ground (stanza three, line two) it is apparent that the season is (dry) autumn. Autumn comes right before the season (wet) winter, which is a symbol of death (dry leaves). Therefore, one can assume that the narrator is at the demise of his life, and is still frozen by the fear of missing out on one choice, and is therefore getting the double whammy of choosing either missing out on both, causing a mass contradiction and a bit of absurdity or inconsistency.

Besides, "*black*" positively depicts sophistication, glamour, security, emotional safety, efficiency, substance etc so the speaker claims no step had trodden the roads black. On the contrary, "*black*" implies oppression, coldness, menace, heaviness etc. Black is essentially an absence of light, since no wavelengths are reflected, it communicates absolute clarity. "*Fair*" and "*better*" are all adjectives of quality. Fair implies that something is neither excellent nor poor; moderately or tolerably good. The speaker claims to have taken the road which is as just as "*fair*" and that has made all the difference. "*Better*" is a comparative form of good or well, meaning effectively more good or more well. The speaker claims to have better claim in the choice that he made. "*Grassy*" is an adjective resembling or suggestive of grass, and has sense of touch and sight. "*First*" is an adjective of number which denotes position on ascending order. There are two roads and the speaker claims to have kept the first for another day.

We need to establish that, the study goes beyond the analysis of the meaning and stylistic value of individual words or lexical choices. It also analyses multi-word language units, as used in the context of the texts. This is in cognizance of Halliday's (1966:15) thesis that, in the analysis of lexical categories which reflect contextual

meaning, the scholar should be concerned with Synonymy, Antonymy, Hyponymy as well as Contradictory devices for semantic unity and cohesion. As Carter and McCarthy (1988) put it, multi-word units behave largely like single words for the purposes of examining meaning relations in the lexicon.

2. Synonymy as a Device for Semantic Unity and Cohesion

Synonymy simply describes a lexical item that is in some sense similar in meaning with a preceding one. It is not a straightforward repetition of the same lexical item but a repetition of the sense of it. Ogbulogo (2005) defines the concept as a lexical relationship of close relatedness in meaning. According to Longe (1996), synonymy refers to a situation whereby two or more forms are associated with the same meaning. The critical point is that, there are instances of both partial and complete synonymy. For instance, the following lexical items in the poem illustrate the lexico–semantic operation of synonymy: (*diverged* and *bent*). These two words are in the same ambiance or paradigm of verbal category. In the road not taken, Frost describes the kind of rigor mortis that is characteristic making decision or choice in life. He expresses the realization that many of the things that a man does without difficulty in his prime become very hectic and energy- sapping for him somewhere ages and ages. The words *diverged, bent* are used in extending this idea and elaborating it. The critical point is that, all these words pointing to the roads which are regarded as pictogram of choice and they are used by the poet in tracking the readers through the message of the poem. The synonymous lexical items further serve in amplifying the message of the poem; the poet uses them in describing different perspectives on the problems of sorrow or weariness all of these suggest attenuation in the power of man as associated by choice and age. Through these lexical items, the poet is able to develop the idea of regression or being disappointed as the general feature of indecision in life. The words "*sorry*" and "*sigh*" themselves suggest languish, insecurity, apologetic, regretful, remorseful, sad, unhappy, groan, moan and lack of freedom. Other synonymous lexical items in the poem which seem to perform this function include *doubt* and *difference.* The seemingly synonymous words like *worn* and *trodden* are deployed to describe the two roads which now swerved into a yellow wood. The critical point here is that, as Carter and McCarthy (1988:201) put it, surface cohesive ties, such as synonymous should not be looked on just as interesting formal patterns, but as manifestations of how we are making sense of the message of the text.

2.1 Antonymy as a Device for Semantic Contrast and Cohesion

Antonymy describes lexical items which are opposite in meaning. These words, according to Carter and McCarthy (1988), also function as cohesive ties in a text. In "*The*

Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost, the device is used in achieving or expressing challenge of ideas. Some of them appear in the form of phrasal expressions. For instance, the poem describes two roads. The two antonymous phrasal lexemes which describe this differing behavior are "*looked down*" in stanza one line four. The expression looked down means to turn one's gaze downward at someone or something. Therefore, the speaker looks down upon one of the roads as far as he could to where it bent in the undergrowth. Also "*leads on*" in stanza three, line four implies to show the way by going in advance and the speaker describes the roads as leading on to the undergrowth. These expressions indicate that the persona is both indecisive and inordinate. The incongruous relation of the lexemes helps the poet in achieving the humorous sense he wants the poem to produce in readers.

2.2 Contradictory as a Device for the Expression of Paradoxical Relations for Cohesion

According to Ogbulogo, (2005) contradiction presents two opposing propositions at the same time. Frost also expresses contradicting relations. This is true, the association of certain words which do not have the kind of semantic relationship but rather whose association is that of disassociation. The poet enunciates the feeling of discrepancy that envelopes human beings when they are struck by indecision. The contradiction of the title 'the road not taken' and the line 'and I took the one less travel' is captured and adumbrates the fact that decision or no decision life must go on. The title suggests that the speaker did not take any of the roads yet continued to say that he took the one less travelled and that is a contradictory statement. Also, where we find the expression "*yellow wood*" and "wanted wear; "*This raises the question- how can it be yellow if it were wood?*" And how can it be wanted and wear if it were a road? Though the association of the two words describes the phenomenon of contradiction, their choice is strategic in the poem as they amplify the description of the roads in the undergrowth which they describe, making it more concrete than when describe simply as being wood. These lines appear to contain a contradiction. The poet says that the paths were equally "*fair*" and yet he also indicates that one path had "*the better claim*". The poet has contradictory feelings about his decision to take a particular path. "*Difference*," in the very last line of this poem is another contradiction. There really isn't a difference in the choices, so what "*difference*" is the poet speaking about exactly? It can be taken in two ways. One, Frost is merely mocking the unconformity one seems to adhere with this poem, and bringing out the fact that with everyone being so-called different, aren't you really just all being the same? This also coincides with the roads being another symbolic peace. Also, the word '*difference*' can help bring out the fact that choosing a road actually being no longer in indecision would make all the '*difference*' because you'd actually be moving

along with your life. In 1961, Frost himself commented that "*The Road Not Taken*" is "*a tricky poem, very tricky*". The trickiness may lie in the speaker's contradictions in characterizing the diverging roads. At first, the two roads seem very different, but upon closer analysis, these differences all but vanish. Again, the second stanza opens by asserting that the one road is "*just as fair*" as the other and ends with the statement that "*the passing there had worn them really about.*" Secondly, it is antithetical because the traveler comes to the fork in the road; he wishes he could travel both. Within the current theories of our physical word, this is not possible unless he has a split personality. The traveler realizes this and immediately rejects the idea. Yet another slight contradiction is the two remarks in the second stanza about the road less traveled. On one hand, it is described as "*grassy*" and "*wanted wear,*" after which he turns to say the roads are actually worn about the same. Perhaps the road less traveled by makes travelers turn back.

3. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the analysis of the lexical choices show one can use stylistics to espouse an interpretation of a poem, and how it can also highlight elements of a poem that one might otherwise miss. Of course, my original thought of the poem was the same as everyone else's that the poem was simply about being unique. However, with some careful analysis, we have come to a much different conclusion. On the whole though, the write up has shown how the linguistic features of a poem are directly related to meaning, and in so doing the writer has upheld his initial interpretation of "*The Road Not Taken*". By using a systematic analytical technique like stylistics, we can ensure that our interpretation is as explicit and grounded in fact, as it can be. The work has looked at lexical categories such as nouns in terms of their concreteness and abstractness, verbs in terms of their tenses, valency and kinds, pronouns with respect to case, adjectives with colour and quality. It has also looked at synonymous, antonymous, and contradiction as semantic unity and cohesion. We hope that the work has profoundly explain why stylistic is a useful tool in the analysis of a text.

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