

# **A Literary Stylistic Analysis of Ernest Hemingway's Short Stories: What Might be Hiding Beneath Linguistics in the "Big Two-Hearted River" Sequence?\***

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## **Abstract**

This study is conducted to explore Hemingway's famous short story sequence, "Big Two-Hearted River" on the basis of stylistic approach. The writer is a controversial figure, well-known for his understated prose style which he named the iceberg technique, or the technique of omission. Hemingway deviates from certain norms of language and therefore establishes his own norms to enhance the reader's reading experience. The study aims to explain how the grammatical deviation Hemingway employs in his short stories enhances the aesthetic values of his work and how grammatical

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deviation characteristics found in his short stories are related to his iceberg technique. The theoretical framework used in this study is adapted from Short's linguistic deviation (1996) with the sole focus on grammatical deviation.

**Keywords:** Ernest Hemingway; iceberg technique; literary stylistics; linguistic deviation; grammatical deviation; short story

# การวิเคราะห์ลีลาภาษาในเรื่องสั้น ของเออร์เนสต์ เฮมิงเวย์: อะไรคือสิ่งที่อาจจะซ่อนอยู่ ในภาษาวรรณกรรมเรื่องสั้นสองตอนเรื่อง “Big Two-Hearted River”\*

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## บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาครั้งนี้จัดทำขึ้นเพื่อวิเคราะห์เกี่ยวกับลีลาภาษาวรรณกรรมของผลงานเรื่องสั้นสองตอนที่โด่งดังของเออร์เนสต์ เฮมิงเวย์ เรื่อง “Big Two-Hearted River” เฮมิงเวย์ถือเป็นนักเขียนที่มีชื่อเสียงทางด้านลีลาการเขียนร้อยแก้วในเชิงพูด น้อยกว่าความเป็นจริง (understated prose style) ลีลาการเขียนของเขาแตกต่างจากงานเขียนในยุคสมัยเดียวกันอย่างมาก ซึ่งเขาเองเรียกเทคนิคนี้ว่า เทคนิคไอซ์เบิร์ก

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(Iceberg technique) หรือเทคนิคที่ละการกล่าวถึงแก่นของเนื้อหา เข้าได้เฉพาะกกฎทางภาษาบางประการและตั้งบรรทัดฐานทางภาษาของตนเองขึ้นมาใหม่เพื่อเสริมสร้างประสบการณ์การอ่านให้ผู้อ่าน การศึกษาครั้งนี้ต้องการอธิบายถึงภาษาวรรณกรรมของเอมิงเวียร์ที่ผิดแปลงไปจากหลักภาษา (Grammatical deviation) และออนไลน์เชิงสุนทรียศาสตร์ (Aesthetic value) โดยนำภาษาที่ปรากฏในวรรณกรรมข้างต้นมาวิเคราะห์หาความเกี่ยวเนื่องกับเทคนิคไอซ์เบิร์ก กรอบแนวความคิดวิจัยที่นำมาใช้ได้ปรับมาจากทฤษฎีการเบี่ยงเบนทางภาษาของ Short (1996) โดยมุ่งเน้นศึกษาการเบี่ยงเบนทางด้านไวยากรณ์เป็นสำคัญ

**คำสำคัญ:** เออร์เนสต์ เอมิงเวียร์; เทคนิคไอซ์เบิร์ก; การศึกษาลีลาภาษาวรรณกรรม; การเบี่ยงเบนทางภาษา; การเบี่ยงเบนทางไวยากรณ์; เรื่องสั้น

## 1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway is a famous American writer whose style has become one of the greatest influences on modern prose styles in the twentieth century (Meyers, 1985, p. 114). It is a style so distinct from the prose of his time that it has spawned many positive and negative criticisms and comments. It is known as the iceberg technique, or the theory of omission. The style encompasses the use of a limited number of simple words, a plain writing style with colorless adjectives and adverbs, and weak and unusual syntax. Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and his status as a writer is well established, but his works are controversial even now.

The majority of studies of his works are literary criticism, psychoanalysis and theories that deal with his life during the war. Very few have taken a literary stylistic approach, which bases its interpretation on foregrounding linguistic evidence. This study is constructed to investigate the grammatical deviations and aesthetic values that are created as the result of certain violations of grammatical rules. Then, the study explains the connection between grammatical deviation and the iceberg technique.

A stylistic approach was used as a tool to interpret the two selected famous short stories by Ernest Hemingway, the “Big Two-Hearted River” sequence. The reason for selecting the “Big Two-Hearted River” sequence as the subject of examination was that Hemingway’s short stories are better-regarded than his novels (Tyler, 2001, cited in Hietanen, 2009, p. 6). Senaha (2010, p. 49) also adds that these two stories are known to have remarkable characteristics of the iceberg technique, the predominant style that established a reputation for Hemingway. Hence, this study was conducted with the aim of

becoming a part of an initial guideline to more analyses of literary works that are based on linguistic method and culminate in less subjective results.

The main research questions that this study intends to explore are as follows:

- 1) What are the characteristics of Hemingway's writing style based on linguistic deviation found in "Big Two-Hearted River" Parts I and II and what aesthetic values are achieved through those linguistic deviations?
- 2) How is the iceberg technique displayed in the two selected stories?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Literary Stylistics

Stylistics, or linguistic criticism, is a way of interpreting texts by systematically analyzing linguistic forms and features within a text (Toolan, 1990, p. 28). A linguist uses linguistic evidence to interpret meanings. Stylistics attempts to explain scientifically the relationship between language styles and aesthetic values that are created through the analyses of certain linguistic forms within a text (Leech and Short, 1981, p. 11). Leech (1969) explains that linguistic deviation can be described as an unexpected irregularity, which is important tangible evidence that contributes to the stylistic approach.

## 2.2 Linguistic Deviation

Leech (1969, p. 50) explains the term linguistic deviation as the creative use of language unorthodox to literary convention. He also believes that literature is a linguistic activity distinguishable from all other varieties due to its degree of deviant features in itself. It is a sacred place for poets or authors to establish their own 'license', their unique style by degrees of unorthodoxy. Short (1996, p. 11) further explains that "*if a part of a poem is deviant it becomes especially noticeable, or perceptually prominent*". As a result, the foregrounding elements that stand out from the rest would be considered as deviation.

A number of researchers have looked into linguistic deviation in literary works to find how writers use language as an alternative to the conventional style of language usage and how writers use original language to create unexpected surprises and make impressions on readers (Leech, 1969, p. 15). However, this study does not aim to analyze every aspect of linguistic deviation. The indication from a preliminary study and previous studies on Hemingway's style in "The End of Something", published in the same year, and a research article by Zhang (2010) on "Cat in the Rain" have narrowed down the scope of analyses to grammatical deviation, found to be the predominant element influencing Hemingway's writing style in "Big Two-Hearted River".

## 2.3 Grammatical Deviation

There are a great variety of grammatical rules in the English language, and grammatical deviation refers to any departures from those grammatical rules, morphological and syntactical. Whether it be a word that

appears in a place it does not belong in a text or the arrangement of a specific structure of a sentence which violates a rule of grammar, all are considered deviations (Short, 1996, p. 47). Short (1996, p. 47) further points out that word-order violation is the most common characteristic among grammatical deviations, for example, an adjective that comes after a noun as in *car big* (big car), or *sea calm* (calm sea). Nonetheless, it is very common to find various characteristics of grammatical deviation within literary texts. Some examples are shown in the following: the use of an incomplete sentence such as *Peter sleeps*; or run-on sentences and wrong punctuation such as *he eats fruits and sleep and shop, in the afternoon he drives to town, and sell his cow and fix his bike*; or nouns mentioned for the first time in the context that are always pre-modified by the definite article 'the', and qualitative adjectives that are scarcely used, or which also can be manipulated in terms of their degree of quality such as in the use of *a good ruler* without any description, leaving the reader unable to understand how good is good for a ruler.

### 3. Methods

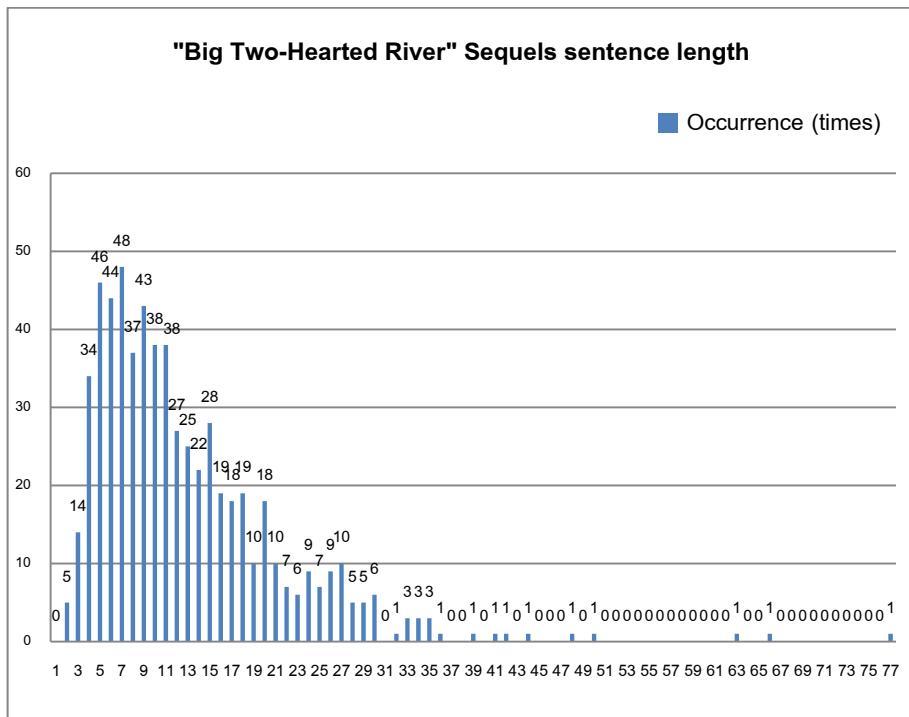
A quantitative approach was applied in statistical analysis and the interpretation-based analysis was where the qualitative approach was involved. The analysis was divided into three main sections. First, the whole text was broken down into terminable units, units that are separated by punctuation marks to ease sentence length and complexity analysis. Second, nominal structures were put into *AntConc 3.4.4w* to sort out the concordance of the word 'the' and then recorded manually for the co-occurring nouns that are mentioned for the first time in the story. Third, the adjectives in the short stories were recorded manually. After the recording, the recorded data were

examined for characteristics that fit the criteria for grammatical deviation. Aesthetic values gained from specific characteristics were explained so as to answer the first research question. Regarding the second research question, a comparative investigation between Hemingway's iceberg technique and the evidence from grammatical deviation in the "Big Two-Hearted River" sequels was conducted and explained.

## **4. Findings and Discussions**

### **4.1 Sentence Length and Complexity**

In the total number of 627 sentences in the "Big Two-Hearted River" sequence, the average sentence length is 12.88 words per sentence. The most common sentence length throughout the sequence is seven words per sentence and the second most common sentence length is five words per sentence. In this study, the norm of modern English sentence length of 17.8 words long (Ellegard, 1978, p. 43) is used as a guideline for measuring sentence length.



**Figure 1.** Combined sentence length and frequency of "Big Two-Hearted River" sequence

According to the sentence complexity analysis, the predominant sentence length in the "Big Two-Hearted River" sequence is the grouping of between four-word-long sentences to eleven-word-long sentences, constituting 328 sentences of the total number of 627 sentences in the sequence, thus accounting for 52.3%, more than half. of the sentences in the sequence. Furthermore, 468 sentences of two to sixteen words in length account for 74.6% of the sentences in the sequence. When one looks at the sentences between seventeen to seventy-seven words long, one could find only 159 sentences throughout the sequence, which accounts for 25.4% of the sequence. The result

shows that, even though Hemingway is believed to make use of short sentences as his primary norm in his prose style, he also employs a significant percentage of long sentences in this literary work.

In the following paragraphs, the study will analyze some of the excerpts taken from the "Big Two-Hearted River" sequence in terms of sentence length and aesthetic values created through the employment of each.

Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. (9 words) He had not been unhappy all day. (7 words) This was different though. (4 words) Now things were done. (4 words) There had been this to do. (6 words) Now it was done. (4 words) It had been a hard trip. (6 words)

The extract above, taken from pages 183 and 184 of the Fenton's Edition, is a series of short sentences, appearing after Nick set up his tent. All the sentences above appear to be much shorter than the normal sentence length in modern English. Notably, there are degrees of repetitions and parallelisms throughout the passage within four to ten-word sentences. Repetition and parallelism are two of the famous rhetorical devices to create foregrounding elements reinforcing and emphasizing a certain message that has been embedded within the context. Though they lack coherence, reading the sentences above could depict still images as Trodd (2007, p. 17) believes that little fractions create a complete sense of a whole as the reader tends to use a collage of images to create an animated scene within her or his mind.

He came down a hillside covered with stumps into a meadow.  
(11 words) At the edge of the meadow flowed the river. (9 words)  
Nick was glad to get to the river. (8 words) He walked upstream

through the meadow. (6 words) His trousers were soaked with the dew as he walked. (10 words)

Short sentences are also employed by Hemingway in narrative parts to set a scene and to convey the feelings of his protagonist. Again, the excerpt shows five sentences arranged with disregard for coherence, and they are much shorter in length than Ellegard's norm. The chunk of sentences would surprise the reader because they are not connected. When the reader reads the whole excerpt, he would picture each frame based on each sentence and put the individual frames together to create a composite impression of the situation.

On many occasions in "Big Two-Hearted River", Hemingway employs exceptionally long sentences, piling up clause after clause, creating co-ordinated sentences with the help of conjunctions, commas, or sometimes without any punctuation at all. The seventy-seven-word long sentence below is taken from page 178, describing the kingfisher Nick saw in the river.

As the shadow of the kingfisher moved up the stream a big trout shot up stream in a long angle, only his shadow marking the angle, then lost his shadow as he came through the surface of the water, caught the sun, and then, as he went back into the stream under the surface, his shadow seemed to float down the stream with the current, unresisting, to his post under the bridge where he tightened facing upstream. (77 words)

In this extract, there is only one sentence if we consider the termination point of the sentence to be at the punctuation mark. Hemingway describes the swift animated motion of a kingfisher. Therefore, a series of the

word “and” and commas are used to convey the immediacy and the escalated feelings in the situation, although he has to violate the rules of grammar by creating a run-on sentence. Concerning literary technique, such usage is known as polysyndeton. Nevertheless, putting a punctuation mark in any part of the sentence would disrupt the flow of the reader’s thought.

He sat on the logs, smoking, drying in the sun, the sun warm on his back, the river shallow ahead, entering the woods, curving into the woods, shallow, light glittering, big watersmooth rocks, cedars along the bank and white birches, the logs warm in the sun, smooth to sit on, without bark, grey to the touch; slowly the feeling of disappointment left him. (63 words)

Here, Hemingway makes use of another long sentence with similar structure to serve a purpose different from that of the previous sentence. By deviating from his own norm and the norms of grammar, this time, Hemingway uses this long sentence to describe the setting of the story. Little information is provided about the character, nearly all that is given is the atmosphere around Nick, the protagonist. This is to enable the reader to visualize a collage of photos and render a scenic ensemble.

#### 4.2 Distinctive Use of the Definite Article

In the first paragraph of the sequence, many words are introduced for the first time with the definite article. We all know that the definite article is used in front of a noun when it is believed that the reader knows exactly what is being referred to. The word “the” is usually used for a specific noun, a noun that is known to both the sender and the receiver of the message.

Other usage can be considered a violation of this norm of grammar. The excerpt below is taken from the first paragraph of “Big Two-Hearted River” Part I, where the underlined nouns occur for the first time with the definite article.

The train went on up the track out of sight around one of the hills of burnt timber.

Nick sat down on the bundle of canvas and bedding the baggage man had pitched out of the door of the baggage car. There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burnt over country. (p. 177)

Throughout the sequence, it is found that Hemingway uses the definite article with nouns that appear in the story for the first time to create the feeling of familiarity in his readers. Some of the excerpted sentences that share the same element are shown below.

Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins. (p. 177)

He took out the ax out of the pack and chopped out two projecting roots. (p. 183)

The uses of the definite article together with nouns that are mentioned for the first time within the sentences pull the reader’s mind to recollect inevitably scenes from their own life experience. Different readers may interpret each noun differently. There are degrees of *the current*, so many kinds of *the pack harness*, different types of *the range of hills*, and even the sizes and appearances of *the ax*, of which Hemingway chooses to omit rather than detailing. The fact that Hemingway omits the description and chains nouns with the definite article

creates the effect of familiarity (Zhang, 2010: 158), a way in which the writer urges the reader to fill in the details of things such as places and objects by themselves. Ong (1975, p. 13) proposes an insightful linguistic interpretation of Hemingway's writing style based on his use of the definite article. He states that the definite article "the" derives from the Old English article "seo", which holds a reference of distance, referring to "the" certain identity of an object known by both author and audience, creating a "you-and-me" effect. The "you-and-me" effect, therefore, implies that the speaker and the listener are in close proximity, pointing out a distant object or a noun that is seen by both.

#### 4.3 The Use of Adjectives

Many researches point out that Hemingway does his best to avoid using adjectives where possible. This creates "*a style in accordance with the esthetics and ethics of raising the emotional temperature towards the level of universal truth by shutting the door on sentiment, on the subjective*" (Hallengren, 2001, p. 1). Even though Hemingway is believed by many researchers to distrust adjectives (Barry, 1995, p. 208), his "Big Two-Hearted River" sequence shows that he does not just eliminate them from his works. Rather, Hemingway chooses to provide the reader with qualitative adjectives that convey wide degrees of qualities and feelings without showing a specific in-depth quality of a noun. A collage of adjectives shown below is taken from the first part of the "Big Two-Hearted River" sequence.

burnt, burned-over, clear, log-driven, satisfactory, happy, big,  
small, heavy, distant, ankle-high, solid, hot, shadeless, sharp,  
black, good, unhappy, fine, darkening, sleepy, deep, wet.

Among the adjectives found in the sequence, many describe common characteristics of things as objects, with a few related to feelings. However, those adjectives are plain and simple, easy to understand, and provide broad meanings to the entities they describe. Some of the other examples are as follows: *the big trout*, *a fine trout*, *the distant river*, *a hot day*, *He was happy*, *the pack was heavy*, and *the grass is wet*. If the reader is given *a fine trout*, he may think: “how fine is fine?” If the reader is given *the grass is wet*, he may also think: “how wet is considered wet?” This omitted information from the plain, flat adjectives encourages the reader to try hard and imagine the missing piece of information to complement the mental pictures or a certain entity entirely in his own way.

#### 4.4 The Iceberg Technique in the “Big Two-Hearted River” Sequence

Throughout the sequence there have been a number of identifiable characteristics analyzed with the tool called grammatical deviation in the literary stylistic approach. Hence, this part explains the relationship between the deviation and the iceberg technique in the sequence.

Sentences in the “Big Two-Hearted River” are mainly narrative since there is only one character in the story. Short sentences are usually non-descriptive, giving basic information on a who-does-what or a what-happens basis. They are piled up together and written in a way that explains the atmosphere of the scene or the character’s thoughts while long run-on sentences which can grammatically be broken down into shorter sentences show immediacy and elevation in intenseness of actions in the story without any interruption. Both short and long sentences share the same goal, which

is to urge the reader to compile a big picture from the clues given as fragmented information.

The violation of the grammatical rule by using the definite article with nouns that occur for the first time also relates to the iceberg technique. The word "the" normally refers to an entity denoted by a noun that is known to both the speaker and the listener. This case is different. Hemingway omits the description of all the nouns introduced for the first time in his sequence and replaces description with the definite article, allowing the reader to imagine those entities with respect to a familiar experience. When the reader fills in the missing information, he or she should feel involvement and thus the reader's appreciation is established.

His unique way of choosing adjectives also falls into one of the many characteristics of the iceberg technique, the technique that includes all the omission of meanings and structure. Adjectives that he uses are plain, simple and exhibit broad degrees of quality. Without providing specific information for the reader to cling to, he or she would have to rely on his or her own experience, exercising what they know about interpretation. This results in building up a great degree of involvement.

## 5. Conclusion

According to Trodd (2007, p. 17), Hemingway leaves important elements unstated, but provides surrounding clues to attract the reader's attention as if he is demanding the curiosity of the reader to find the meanings that implement the unstated. The iceberg technique is not limited to some certain linguistic deviation, but also lies within the way he structures his ideas into a literary work.

Tanto (2009, p. 43) similarly states that in reading Hemingway's prose, the reader can experience events as an articulate and complex whole. Hemingway breaches the grammatical norms of English and establishes his own norms of writing to enhance the aesthetic value of his works. Sentences significantly shorter than the norm are non-descriptive sentences. Long ungrammatical sentences depict only actions and non-descriptive sentences convey the immediacy of the situation. Adjectives are plain and simple but carry wide degrees of quality and feeling. Such violation can also be perceived as the iceberg technique; the technique allows him to state the fact that is true, while the fact that holds the aesthetic values are unstated or substituted with other facts floating above the water as the tip of the iceberg. Ultimately, those who think hard enough will be able to see the value deep down underneath the water level and an involvement, then, is established. This, perhaps, is why Hemingway's writing style has become the most influential style of the twentieth century (Meyers, 1985, p. 114).

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