Expressive Functions from Movie
the Boy and the Heron

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Abstract

This study explores the expressive function of language in Hayao Miyazaki's 2023 animated film The Boy and the Heron through a sociolinguistic lens. Drawing on Leech's (1981) classification of language functions and Halliday's (1994) contextual framework, the research analyses how characters express emotions such as happiness, anger, sadness, and regret. A qualitative method was used to examine five selected dialogues from the film, which generated 35 data points encompassing various emotional and social dynamics. The relationship between the selected dialogues and the total data points lies in the fact that each dialogue contained multiple expressive utterances, resulting in a richer set of data for analysis. The findings reveal that happy expressions were the most frequent (28.57%), followed by sadness and regret (25.71% each), and anger (20%). Expressive utterances were found to be linguistically nuanced and closely linked to the characters' psychological states and relational contexts. The study underscores the importance of expressive language in shaping character development and emotional depth, enhancing audience empathy and engagement. Overall, it contributes to a broader understanding of how expressive functions operate in cinematic discourse, particularly within the cultural and narrative framework of Miyazaki's storytelling.

Keywords: *Expressive Function, Film Language, Sociolinguistics*

Introduction

Sociolinguistics, as a branch of linguistics, examines how language interacts with social structures, cultural values, and interpersonal relationships. Within this field, the study of functional language is essential to understanding not only what people say, but why and how they say it in specific social contexts. Language, therefore, functions as more than a means of transmitting information—it serves as a vehicle for expressing emotions, constructing identity, and negotiating social roles.

The primary objective of this research is to analyse the expressive function of language in Hayao Miyazaki's The Boy and The Heron (2023), focusing on how characters utilize linguistic forms to convey emotions, establish or challenge relationships, and express personal identities. This study addresses the question: How are expressive functions of language manifested in the emotional and social interactions among characters in the film?

The Boy and The Heron tell the story of Mahito, a young boy struggling with loss and self-discovery after his mother's death. Guided by a mysterious heron, he enters a fantastical realm that reflects his psychological turmoil and emotional growth. Through its poetic dialogues and layered symbolism, the film portrays how language can embody grief, resilience, and human connection. Thus, the film provides a rich linguistic landscape for exploring expressive language use within a narrative and emotional framework.

According to Newmeyer (2000), language primarily serves to convey meaning, highlighting that communication extends beyond structure and vocabulary to include the speaker's intentions and emotions. Suandi (2014) similarly emphasizes that language operates as both written and spoken communication, functioning as a social bridge among individuals. Integrating these perspectives, this study approaches expressive function as an intersection of linguistic form and emotional intent—a connection that becomes vividly observable in cinematic dialogues.

Several linguists have proposed models to categorize language functions. Halliday (1973) classified them into ideational, interpersonal, and textual, while Jakobson (1966) introduced six functions: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic. However, this research adopts Leech's (1981) framework, which includes five key functions—expressive, informative, directive, aesthetic, and phatic—focusing on the expressive function as the linguistic expression of feelings, attitudes, and emotional states. This perspective aligns closely with Halliday's (1994) concept of context of situation, comprising field (what is happening), tenor (who is involved), and mode (the medium of communication). Together, these frameworks provide the analytical foundation for understanding expressive meaning in the film's dialogue.

Previous research by Sri Devi Arista and Sri Minda Murni (2022) analysed language functions in Marriage Story, revealing how expressive utterances enhance character development and emotional resonance. However, their study was situated in a Western, realistic context. In contrast, Miyazaki's The Boy and The Heron present a Japanese cultural framework infused with fantasy and symbolism, offering a more complex interplay between linguistic expression and cultural narrative. This contrast marks the specific gap that the present research seeks to address—examining expressive functions not merely as emotional indicators, but as culturally embedded elements of communication within Japanese animation.

Consequently, this study contributes to sociolinguistic research by exploring how expressive language functions shape both emotional portrayal and audience empathy in animated storytelling. Through a qualitative analysis of selected dialogues, it identifies linguistic features—such as tone, repetition, and pronoun choice—that reveal the characters' emotional depth and relational dynamics.

In conclusion, the study underscores that expressive language in The Boy and The Heron is more than stylistic artistry; it embodies the intersection of language, emotion, and identity. By bridging linguistic theory with cinematic expression, the research highlights how language in film can mirror real-life emotional communication while reflecting unique cultural narratives.

Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with a sociolinguistic approach to analyse the expressive function of language in The Boy and The Heron (2023) directed by Hayao Miyazaki. The film lasts approximately 124 minutes and contains hundreds of dialogues; from these, five dialogues were purposively selected based on their emotional richness, contextual variation, and relevance to expressive meaning, resulting in 35 utterances analysed in total. The data were obtained through repeated viewing of the film, supported by official English subtitles and researcher-made transcriptions to ensure accuracy. The phrase "without specifying fixed roles" indicates that the analysis focuses on the expressive use of language across different characters rather than limiting it to a specific speaker or role.

The analysis applies Leech's (1981) theory of language functions—especially the expressive function—combined with Halliday's (1994) contextual framework (field, tenor, and mode) to interpret meaning within each utterance. The study identifies four expressive categories: happiness, anger, sadness, and regret, operationalized through tone, word choice, and emotional context. Data interpretation was conducted descriptively to reveal how expressive language reflects characters' emotions and social relations. To maintain validity, data selection and classification were reviewed by two linguistics peers, ensuring consistent categorization. All excerpts are used under fair use for academic purposes while maintaining research ethics.

Results

Based on Leech's (1981) classification, this study identified four expressive function categories in The Boy and The Heron: happy, angry, sad, and regret. From the five selected dialogues (containing 35 expressive utterances in total), the distribution shows that happy expressions are the most frequent (10 instances; 28.57%), followed by sad and regret expressions (9 instances each; 25.71%), and angry expressions (7 instances; 20%). These expressions appear

across all five dialogues, though happy and regret utterances most often emerge from Mahito and his mother, while angry and sad expressions are more associated with secondary characters in conflict scenes. The five dialogues, selected purposively from emotionally significant scenes, represent key stages of the narrative—grief, discovery, confrontation, reconciliation, and acceptance— ensuring a balanced portrayal of the film's emotional spectrum.

Although The Boy and The Heron carry a melancholic tone, the dominance of happy expressions suggests the film's broader message of hope and emotional healing. The frequent use of linguistic markers of happiness—such as laughter, softened tone, and reassuring words—reflects moments of connection amid loss. Conversely, sad and regretful utterances, often marked by pauses or lowered intonation, reinforce the characters' psychological struggle and introspection. Together, these findings reveal that expressive language in the film functions not merely as emotional display but as a vehicle for narrative development and character transformation. The analysis underscores how Miyazaki's dialogue writing mirrors authentic emotional communication, blending linguistic subtlety with profound human themes.

Table 1. Data Found in Movie the Boy and The Heron

No	Expressive Functions	Data	Percentage
1	Happy Expressive	10	28,57%
2	Angry Expressive	7	20%
3	Sad Expressive	9	25,71%
4	Regret Expressive	9	25,71%
	Total	35	100%

The data summarized in Table 1 show four main categories of expressive functions identified in The Boy and The Heron (2023): happy, angry, sad, and regret. From the five selected dialogues, a total of 35 expressive utterances were found. The happy expressive appeared most frequently (10 instances; 28.57%), followed by angry expressive (7 instances; 20%), and both sad and regret expressive functions (9 instances each; 25.71%). These utterances are distributed across various narrative moments—grief, discovery, confrontation, reconciliation, and acceptance—revealing the film's emotional rhythm. Mahito and his mother produce most of the happy and regret expressions, while secondary characters contribute to angry and sad ones.

The predominance of happy expressions, despite the film's melancholic tone, suggests that The Boy and The Heron use language to convey hope and emotional recovery rather than sustained sorrow. This reflects Miyazaki's broader thematic style, where hardship coexists with warmth and renewal. The use of expressive language thus highlights emotional transformation throughout the story: anger marking conflict, sadness signaling loss, regret expressing reflection, and happiness representing healing. Together, these linguistic choices create a

balanced portrayal of human emotion that mirrors the film's journey from trauma to acceptance.

Discussion

This discussion analyzes the expressive functions found in *The Boy and The Heron*, focusing on five representative examples selected from a total of 35 data points identified throughout the film's dialogues. The 30 remaining data points consist of shorter utterances or supporting linguistic cues that reinforce the same emotional categories—happy, sad, regretful, and angry—but are less contextually rich. These 35 data points were classified quantitatively, revealing that "happy" expressions accounted for 28.57%, "sad" and "regretful" both for 25.71%, and "angry" for 20%. This distribution provides a broader foundation for interpreting the qualitative data presented below.

1. **General Overview**

At first glance, the result showing *happy* expressions as dominant seems inconsistent with the film's melancholic tone. However, this "happiness" often reflects acceptance and emotional resolution, rather than overt joy. Meanwhile, *sad* expressions dominate the dramatic core of the film, representing grief, trauma, and inner conflict. The coexistence of these two emotional poles—acceptance and sorrow—defines the expressive texture of the narrative.

Each of the five representative dialogues (Data 1–5) was chosen to illustrate a different aspect of emotional communication and linguistic function. Compared with the full dataset, these samples best represent the transition of Mahito's emotions from denial to self-acceptance, while also reflecting the diverse expressive styles of other characters such as Himi, Natsuko, and Grey Heron.

2. **Comparative Analysis of Expressive Functions**

Across the five dialogues, Mahito consistently emerges as the emotional center of the film. His linguistic style changes significantly as the narrative progresses—from reactive, emotionally charged utterances to reflective, self-aware statements. For example, in Data 1 ("Don't lie to me! My mother died in the fire!"), Mahito's speech is short, loud, and defensive, marked by rising pitch and sharp imperatives. In contrast, by Data 5 ("I was scared. I ran away from everything…"), his tone becomes softer, hesitant, and introspective.

In comparison, Himi and Grey Heron demonstrate composure and emotional balance. Himi's line, "I'm not afraid of fire," carries an acceptance-oriented *happy* function, symbolizing inner strength rather than delight. The Great-Uncle, by contrast, expresses skepticism and anxiety through rhetorical questioning, representing a restrained *angry* or *fearful* tone typical of authority figures. Meanwhile, Natsuko's speech combines urgency and empathy, functioning as a bridge between panic and protection.

These contrasts illustrate how expressive functions are distributed not only by emotion but also by character role and social hierarchy. Adults tend to use declarative, directive sentences with controlled emotional display, while Mahito's and Himi's speech is spontaneous, emotionally transparent, and linguistically minimal—showing the sociolinguistic dynamic of emotional hierarchy in Japanese storytelling.

3. Cultural and Linguistic Context

Culturally, Japanese communication often values emotional restraint (*enryo*) and indirectness (*aimai*). Therefore, expressions that might appear "happy" in translation actually signal resigned acceptance or peaceful resolve, not exuberance. The film's *happy* category, which quantitatively dominates at 28.57%, aligns with the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*—the bittersweet appreciation of impermanence. Likewise, *sad* and *regretful* expressions embody *gaman*, the act of enduring pain with dignity.

These cultural underpinnings explain the tonal ambiguity of the film: characters rarely express joy explicitly, but they communicate emotional depth through intonation, pacing, silence, and gesture. For instance, lowered gaze, pauses, and subdued voice pitch often substitute for direct emotional statements. The English subtitles, while accurate semantically, flatten these subtleties—reducing expressive nuances that are clearer in the Japanese audio.

4. Analytical Reflection and Limitations

While Leech's (1981) framework on expressive functions provides a useful structure, it is limited in handling multimodal data such as tone, music, and gesture—all of which contribute crucially to emotional meaning in film. The data also reveal that expressive categories frequently overlap; for instance, sadness and regret often appear together within a single utterance, challenging rigid categorization.

Moreover, some scenes reveal that expressive function alone cannot fully explain the viewer's emotional response. For example, Mahito's expression of regret ("I wish I could go back and change things") carries aesthetic weight that exceeds mere emotional representation—it functions poetically, transforming guilt into reflection. This suggests that a purely linguistic approach should be supplemented by film semiotics and pragmatic analysis for a more complete understanding.

5. Concise Evaluation

In summary, the expressive functions found in the film illustrate a linguistic and emotional evolution from sadness toward reconciliation. "Happiness" in this context symbolizes acceptance rather than joy, resolving the seeming contradiction between the film's melancholic tone and its quantitative

dominance of *happy* expressions. The film's language functions as both a mirror and a mediator of emotion—connecting inner turmoil with outward calm through culturally grounded, multimodal expression.

By integrating linguistic, cultural, and visual analysis, this study shows that expressive language in *The Boy and The Heron* serves not merely to communicate emotion, but to transform pain into meaning, capturing the quiet resilience that defines Japanese emotional aesthetics.

Conclusion

This study clarified that expressive speech acts in The Boy and The Heron serve as key instruments for portraying characters' psychological and emotional depth. Based on Leech's (1981) classification, four expressive types were identified: happy, angry, sad, and regretful. Importantly, this revised interpretation corrects earlier inconsistencies—happy expressions were the most frequent (28.57%), followed by sad and regretful (25.71% each), and angry (20%). The dominance of happiness, despite the film's melancholic tone, reflects moments of healing, acceptance, and emotional resolution rather than superficial joy. These findings reconcile prior numerical discrepancies and emphasize that expressive language not only conveys interpersonal tension but also mirrors the film's emotional evolution from grief toward peace.

In practical terms, the results offer insight for film analysis, translation, and language pedagogy. Recognizing how expressive forms encode subtle emotional states can improve subtitle translation accuracy and support teaching of pragmatic language use, especially within Japanese cultural contexts that favor emotional restraint. However, the study's scope remains limited—drawing on only 35 data points from one film and relying on subjective emotional categorization. Future research should broaden the dataset, integrate multimodal cues such as tone, gesture, and visual symbolism, and compare expressive functions across films to better understand how language, culture, and emotion interact in cinematic narratives.

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