

Unspoken Tension: Grammar in Discourse as a Key to Reading Hemingway’s “The Killers”

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Abstract – This study examines Ernest Hemingway’s short story “The Killers” through the lens of Grammar in Discourse, focusing on how grammatical structures function at both the sentence and discourse level as resources for meaning-making in interaction and narrative. The aims are to examine how Hemingway’s grammar operates at the discourse level to shape interactional dynamics and narrative tension, to fill a scholarly gap by providing a systematic analysis of his grammar within this framework, and to highlight the pedagogical potential of using Hemingway’s text in teaching grammar. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, analysing excerpts with attention to tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, repetition, and voice. The analysis shows that Hemingway’s minimalist grammar serves as a stylistic device to heighten tension, realism, and ambiguity. The consistent use of past simple and ellipses in dialogue builds a sense of immediacy and sounds natural. Modal expressions and imperatives emphasize the unequal power dynamic between the gangsters and the victims. Deictic expressions and vague references add to the uncertainty, supporting Hemingway’s iceberg theory of leaving meaning beneath the surface. Pedagogically, the study highlights the potential of integrating literary texts into the teaching of Grammar in Discourse, encouraging learners to see grammar as a resource for constructing meaning, negotiating power, and interpreting stylistic effects.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway, grammar in discourse, pedagogy, “the killers”, stylistics

1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's prose has long been recognized for its stark minimalism, economy of language, and the much-discussed "iceberg theory," whereby the deeper meaning of a narrative lies beneath the surface of the text. In an interview with George Plimpton, Hemingway explains his famous iceberg theory, "*I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. Seven-eighths of it is underwater, and only one part shows*" (Nagado, 2015). Among his short stories, "The Killers" (1927) is frequently regarded as one of the clearest representations of these stylistic characteristics. The story unfolds in a small-town diner where two hitmen arrive and wait for their victim, Ole Anderson, while interacting with George, Nick Adams, and the cook. The narrative is built almost entirely on dialogue, with minimal narration and sparse descriptive detail. Such stylistic economy makes "The Killers" particularly suitable for discourse-oriented analysis because meaning emerges not only from what is explicitly stated but also from omission, silence, and grammatical structure.

Classical studies on Hemingway's fiction have consistently emphasized the stylistic distinctiveness of minimal prose. Early critics such as Carlos Baker and Philip Young identified economy of language, omission, and understated narration as defining characteristics of Hemingway's literary style. Baker (1963), for instance, argued that Hemingway's deliberate omission of explanatory details intensifies emotional and thematic impact, while Young (1966) connected Hemingway's sparse prose to existential themes and psychological restraint. These foundational studies established Hemingway as a writer whose literary power depends heavily on linguistic restraint and implicit meaning. Later scholarship by (Benson, 1990) further demonstrated that Hemingway's short fiction derives much of its narrative force from compressed dialogue and omission, reinforcing the importance of language structure in the construction of meaning.

More recent scholarship has continued to highlight the importance of linguistic and discourse-oriented approaches in literary studies. Recent studies have also highlighted the growing importance of grammar in discourse-oriented language instruction. For example, Marlini et al. (2022) found that English education students perceived grammar in spoken discourse as an essential component of communicative competence, emphasizing the need for contextualized and discourse-based approaches to grammar learning. Such findings reinforce the view that grammar should be understood not merely as a set of formal rules but as a resource for meaning-making in authentic context. Contemporary stylistic research increasingly views grammar as a dynamic resource for constructing characterization, interaction, and reader engagement rather than merely a system of formal rules (Hamawand, 2023; Jeffries & McIntyre, 2025). Similarly, discourse-based studies emphasize the pedagogical and interpretive value of analysing grammar beyond sentence-level structures (Oyama & Kang, 2023; Farrokhi et al., 2018). These developments suggest that grammatical choices in literary texts can shape narrative perspective, interpersonal relations, and emotional tension. However, despite these advances, Hemingway's "The Killers" has rarely been examined specifically through the framework of Grammar in Discourse.

From a discourse-grammatical perspective, Hemingway's stylistic choices can be understood as more than aesthetic preferences. They function as mechanisms through which interpersonal relations, power dynamics, and narrative tension are constructed. For example, when one of the gangsters says, "*What's the idea?*" followed by the curt reply "*Nothing. Just nothing.*" the brevity and repetition of "nothing" create an atmosphere of both evasiveness and finality. Likewise, expressions such as "*We're going to kill a Swede*" or "*I'll give you ten minutes*" illustrate how tense and modality contribute to immediacy, certainty, and threat. These examples demonstrate that grammar in Hemingway's short story "The Killers" is not merely structural but deeply connected to discourse functions and reader interpretation.

The notion of Grammar in Discourse provides an appropriate theoretical lens for examining such textual dynamics. Moving beyond the traditional view of grammar as a collection of isolated rules, this approach emphasizes grammar as a resource for meaning-making in context (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Halliday, 1994). Features, such as tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, and voice, are not only syntactic elements but also discourse strategies that shape interaction, narrative progression, and characterization. Within literary texts, these grammatical choices acquire additional stylistic significance because they contribute simultaneously to thematic development and reader engagement. In Hemingway's case, the deliberate restriction of grammatical variation strengthens the ambiguity, tension, and emotional restraint characteristic of his minimalist narrative style.

While Hemingway's short story "The Killers" has received substantial scholarly attention, most studies concentrate on its themes of fatalism, its stylistic minimalism, or its representation of masculinity

and violence. Analyses often foreground Hemingway's iceberg theory, focusing on what is left unsaid rather than on the linguistic structures that construct the story. Some stylistic studies have addressed Hemingway's sparse vocabulary and dialogue-driven narration, but few have explicitly situated their analysis within the framework of Grammar in Discourse (Abdullayev, 2024). This represents a research gap: there has been little systematic exploration of how Hemingway's grammatical patterns contribute to discourse-level meaning and function as stylistic strategies.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing "The Killers" through the lens of Grammar in Discourse. Specifically, it investigates how Hemingway's use of tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, and voice contributes to the construction of meaning at the discourse level. In doing so, the article demonstrates that the use of grammar in the text is not an incidental feature but a deliberate stylistic choice that underpins the narrative's tension, ambiguity, and thematic resonance. For instance, the frequent use of ellipsis in dialogue (Rahaman, 2023), such as "*What's he like?*" followed by "*He's all right,*" mirrors natural speech and conveys a sense of detachment that aligns with the characters' restrained emotional expression. Likewise, the absence of modal hedges in gangster speech creates an atmosphere of assertiveness and dominance, reinforcing the power asymmetry in the diner scene.

In addition to its literary contribution, this study has pedagogical implications. Literary texts, especially those as linguistically distinctive as "The Killers", provide rich material for teaching Grammar in Discourse. Instead of presenting grammar as abstract rules detached from usage, instructors can use such texts to demonstrate how grammatical forms operate in real communication, constructing meaning, power relations, and stylistic effects. When students encounter utterances like "*I'll give you ten minutes*" or "*You better eat the beans*" in the context of a literary narrative, they can appreciate how grammar functions not only structurally but also pragmatically and stylistically. This aligns with contemporary views of grammar pedagogy that emphasize usage, discourse, and context rather than prescriptive correctness.

Accordingly, the objectives of this article are threefold. First, to examine how Hemingway's use of grammar in "The Killers" operates at the discourse level, shaping interactional dynamics and narrative tension. Second, it seeks to fill the scholarly gap by providing a systematic analysis of Hemingway's grammar within the framework of Grammar in Discourse. Third, it highlights the pedagogical potential of using Hemingway's short story "The Killers" as a resource in teaching grammar, encouraging learners to view grammar as a tool for meaning-making rather than as a set of rigid rules.

1.1. Studies on Hemingway's Style and "The Killers."

Ernest Hemingway is widely recognized for his distinctive prose style, characterized by brevity, understatement, and what he himself termed the "iceberg theory," in which much of the meaning lies beneath the surface of the text. Critics have long associated Hemingway's short stories with his minimalist approach, in which omission and silence play crucial roles in creating tension (Baker, 1963; Benson, 1990; Bloom, 1999). The short story "The Killers" (1927) is often cited as a prime example of this style. The narrative revolves around two hired gunmen who enter a small-town diner in search of a former boxer named Ole Andreson. Yet, much of the drama unfolds not in action but in dialogue and what remains unsaid.

Scholarly attention to "The Killers" has frequently centred on themes of fatalism, violence, and the modernist condition of disillusionment (Gajdusek, 1988; Young, 1966). The story has also been analysed in terms of masculinity, existential silence, and the inevitability of death. Stylistically oriented studies, such as those by (Meyers, 1985) and (Nagel, 1996), emphasize Hemingway's pared-down diction, repetitive dialogue, and reliance on colloquial language. While these contributions illuminate the thematic and stylistic significance of "The Killers", few have explicitly connected Hemingway's stylistic minimalism to systematic analyses of grammar as a discourse resource. This gap provides an opportunity to revisit the story from a linguistic perspective that foregrounds grammar as central to meaning-making.

1.2. Grammar in Literary Discourse

In literary studies, grammar has often been approached through the lens of stylistics, where linguistic form is examined as a means of producing literary effect. Leech & Short (2007) argue that grammar shapes the "style" of a text by influencing point of view, characterization, and tone. (Simpson, 2004) further highlights how grammatical choices contribute to narrative voice and ideological positioning. Within this tradition, literary grammar is not treated as an abstract set of rules but as a functional component of the text's meaning.

Studies of grammar in literary discourse have demonstrated how authors deploy tense, aspect, modality, and deixis to generate atmosphere and manipulate reader expectations. For instance, the simple

present tense may convey immediacy, while ellipsis can simulate authentic speech. In the case of Hemingway, critics have noted his repeated reliance on paratactic sentence structures and simple verb forms (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). However, comprehensive analyses that explicitly treat these features as discourse-level strategies remain limited. This article seeks to bridge that gap by situating Hemingway's grammatical choices within the broader framework of Grammar in Discourse.

1.3. Grammar in Discourse: Theoretical Foundations

Grammar in discourse refers to an approach that examines how grammatical choices, such as tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, and voice, operate within stretches of real language to construct meaning (Esteban, 2024). It treats discourse as the site of grammatical deployment rather than proposing a formal model, such as a discourse analytic work on cohesion and theme-rheme (Garcia Montes et al., 2014). While discourse grammar is a formal framework, functional discourse grammar, which arose from the analysis of spoken and written discourse, posits discourse-level units organized by pragmatic functions; it models grammar as shaped by discourse structure. Meanwhile, systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is Halliday's social semiotic theory that views language as a network of systems for creating ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning through grammar realized through mood, transitivity, and theme, which are linked to the context of situation (Li, 2019).

The theoretical foundation of Grammar in Discourse is closely associated with Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which conceptualizes language as a social semiotic system. According to Halliday (1994) and Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), grammar simultaneously performs three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational represents experience and events, the interpersonal negotiates social relations and speaker stance, while the textual organizes language into coherent discourse. Within this framework, grammatical features such as tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, and voice are not merely formal categories, but functional resources that help speakers and writers construct meaning in context.

Tense and aspect, for example, situate events temporally and influence narrative perspective. In discourse, tense choice may create immediacy, distance, continuity, or detachment depending on how they position events relative to the speaker and the audience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Modality, meanwhile, expresses degrees of certainty, obligation, probability, and speaker commitment. Halliday (as cited in Sangoor & Bedu, 2025) explains that modality operates through scales of probability and usuality, enabling speakers to encode attitude and evaluations within discourse. Consequently, they reveal relationships of authority, certainty, hesitation, or control.

Deixis also plays a central role in discourse meaning because it anchors utterances within spatial, temporal, and interpersonal context. According to Levinson (1983), deictic expressions such as *this*, *here*, *now*, and *you* establish relationships between language and the situation of utterance. Through deixis, speakers position themselves and others within discourse, thereby shaping perspective and interactional dynamics.

Another important discourse feature is ellipsis, which refers to the omission of linguistic elements that can be understood from context. McCarthy (1991) explains that ellipsis commonly occurs in spoken discourse because conversational participants often rely on shared contextual knowledge to interpret incomplete utterances. Elliptical structure, therefore, contributes to conversational economy, naturalness, and pragmatic implication. Similarly, Esteban (2024) argues that ellipsis reflects the efficiency of real-life communication, where speakers frequently omit recoverable information. In literary discourse, ellipsis may also function stylistically by creating ambiguity, tension, and reader involvement.

Voice refers to the relationship between the subject and the verb in a sentence (Lubis et al., 2024). In discourse analysis, however, the choice between active and passive voice extends beyond grammatical variation because it reflects agency, focus, and rhetorical intention. Active voice typically highlights the agent, while passive voice often emphasizes the action. Voice is a grammatical feature that determines the relationship between the verb and its arguments (subject and object). Voice functions as a discourse strategy that shapes emphasis, interpersonal positioning, and interpretation (Lestari, 2025).

In addition to SFL, the present study also draws on a discourse-oriented perspective proposed by Carter & McCarthy (2006), who describe grammar as "patterned choices in discourse." From this perspective, speakers and writers select grammatical structures strategically to achieve communicative goals. Grammar, therefore, becomes a dynamic and context-sensitive system of meaning-making rather

than a static body of prescriptive rules. Amin (2014) similarly argues that discourse-based approaches to grammar teaching emphasize the importance of meaning and communicative context, shifting grammar instruction away from isolated sentence-level analysis.

Drawing on these theoretical perspectives, the present study examines Hemingway's "The Killers" as a discourse-oriented literary text in which grammar functions as a stylistic and pragmatic resource. Hemingway's reliance on simple tense forms, recurrent ellipsis, deixis, modality, and contrast between active and passive constructions is interpreted not merely as stylistic peculiarities but as discourse strategies that construct narrative tension, interpersonal relations, and thematic meaning throughout the story.

1.4. Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on Hemingway's minimalist style, there remains a paucity of research that explicitly applies Grammar in Discourse as an analytical framework to his works. Existing studies on literary language have widely acknowledged the importance of grammar in shaping literary expression and meaning. Scholars in stylistics and discourse studies have demonstrated how grammatical choices contribute to characterization, narrative perspective, atmosphere, and thematic development in literary texts. In Hemingway's case, many studies have highlighted his "telegraphic" sentences, sparse dialogue, and economy of expression as central features of his minimalist style.

However, most of these analyses remain at the level of general stylistic observation and do not systematically investigate how specific grammatical features function within discourse to generate meaning. In particular, the short story "The Killers" has frequently been examined from thematic, stylistic, and existential perspectives, yet it has rarely been explored through the lens of Grammar in Discourse. Consequently, limited attention has been given to the ways grammatical elements such as ellipsis, modality, deixis, and voice interact dynamically to shape narrative progression, interpersonal relations, and tension within the story.

Addressing this gap, the present study integrates insights from literary stylistics with the analytical tools of Grammar in Discourse. By doing so, it not only deepens the understanding of Hemingway's narrative strategies but also highlights the pedagogical potential of teaching grammar through authentic literary discourse.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, focusing on the application of Grammar in Discourse to Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers". The choice of this method is based on the nature of the research problem, which aims to reveal how grammatical structures function beyond the sentence level to create meaning, interaction, and stylistic effects in the narrative. Rather than quantifying data, the analysis seeks to provide interpretive insights into how grammar operates as discourse within a literary context.

2.1. Data Source and Data Collection

The primary data for this study are Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers", first published in 1927 in Scribner's Magazine and later included in *Men Without Women*. In line with this study, the data source was taken from "20th-Century American Short Stories" (1975). The story is considered one of Hemingway's most representative works of minimalist prose and dialogic tension, making it a suitable text for discourse-based grammatical analysis.

The data consist of selected excerpts from "The Killers" that illustrate key grammatical phenomena relevant to discourse analysis, such as: (1) Tense and aspect (simple present, simple past, and their narrative/discourse functions), (2) Modality (use of modal verbs and modal expressions to convey obligation, uncertainty, or attitude), (3) Deixis (spatial, temporal, and personal references in dialogues), (4) Ellipsis and repetition (economy of expression and creation of subtext), and (5) Voice (active vs. passive constructions in building narrative stance). Passages containing these features were purposively sampled to highlight instances where grammar directly relates to meaning-making and stylistic effect.

2.2. Procedures

The analysis followed several steps: (1) Close Reading – Careful examination of the short story to identify grammatical structures that stand out in shaping narrative and interaction, (2) Categorization –

Grouping the data according to discourse grammar features (tense/aspect, modality, deixis, ellipsis, voice), (3) Interpretive Analysis – Analysing how each grammatical feature functions within the discourse of the story, with attention to its role in characterization, tension, and thematic development, and (4) Discussion of Findings – Relating the grammatical analysis to Hemingway’s minimalist style and the broader context of discourse grammar. In line with Denzin & Lincoln (1994) that the qualitative approach implies an emphasis on processes and meanings, which involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter which include the study and collection of variety of empirical material such as case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts (Lestari & Wardhono, 2022).

2.3. Research Orientation

This study draws on Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994) ; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and Carter & McCarthy’s (2006) conception of grammar as discourse, supported by insights from stylistics (Leech & Short, 2007; Simpson, 2004). The integration of these frameworks allows for a multidimensional reading of “The Killers”, where grammar is viewed not merely as structure but as a resource for meaning, interaction, and literary effect.

In line with the objectives of this study, the analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do grammatical features such as tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, and voice function within the discourse of Hemingway’s “The Killers”?
- 2) In what ways do these grammatical choices contribute to the construction of meaning, character interaction, and tension in the story?
- 3) What pedagogical implications can be drawn from the discourse-based grammatical analysis of “The Killers” for the teaching of grammar in discourse?

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Tense and Aspect

One of the most striking features of the short story “The Killers” is Hemingway’s reliance on the simple past tense and his occasional use of the simple present tense in dialogue. The narrative itself is dominated by the simple past, giving the story a sense of detached narrative voice. Meanwhile, the dialogues are rendered in the present, creating immediacy and tension. For example, the opening sentence reads:

“The door of Henry’s lunchroom opened, and two men came in.” (Hemingway, “The Killers”)

Here, the use of the past simple tense (“opened,” “came”) presents events as sequential actions, creating what Leech & Short (2007) describe as a “dynamic progression” of narrative movement. In stylistic analysis, the form of simple past constructions is frequently associated with the linear unfolding of events, enabling readers to follow actions directly and immediately (Simpson, 2004). This grammatical pattern contributes to the impression of a scene unfolding almost cinematically, where actions are presented with minimal authorial intrusion. Such use of tense is also close to Hemingway’s minimalist style. Hemingway’s prose is characterized by economy of language, limited narration, and surface-level description, all of which align with his well-known “iceberg theory” (Benson, 1990; Nagel, 1996). In this context, the dominance of simple past structures minimizes interpretive commentary and instead foregrounds actions as they occur. Grammar, therefore, functions not merely as a structural device but as a discourse strategy that sustains objectivity and tension within the narrative. In contrast, when characters engage in dialogue, the tense usage shifts. Consider this exchange:

“What’s the idea?” George asked.
“Nothing,” said the other. “Except to tell you what we’re going to do.”

The use of the present simple tense in the question “What’s the idea?” together with the future-oriented construction “we’re going to do” provides a sense of immediacy for the interaction, as if it is occurring directly before the reader. According to Halliday & Matthiessen, (2014), the form of present tense in discourse often functions to reduce temporal distance between the event and the audience, thereby increasing the sense of involvement. Similarly, Carter & McCarthy (2006) note that present-

tense constructions in spoken interaction frequently contribute to conversational realism and psychological proximity.

In this exchange, the simple present does not merely identify the time of the actions; rather, it situates the reader within the interaction itself. Meanwhile, the future construction “we’re going to do” signals an action in which is imminent and unavoidable, intensifying the threatening atmosphere of the dialogue. The combination of present and future forms, therefore, creates a discourse effect in which the reader experiences both the immediacy of the ongoing interaction and the anticipation of impending violence.

From the perspective of Grammar in Discourse, tense and aspect are not only markers of time but also indicators of narrative perspective and reader positioning. The simple past tense constructs a detached, matter-of-fact narration that distances the narrator from the characters, while the present-tense dialogues reduce that distance and pull the reader into the unfolding interaction. This alternation between past and present contributes to the tension between detachment and immediacy, a stylistic characteristic frequently associated with Hemingway’s minimalist narrative technique (Leech & Short, 2007; Simpson, 2004).

Thus, tense and aspect in the short story “The Killers” function beyond sentence-level grammar; they operate as discourse strategies that shape reader engagement, balancing the cold objectivity of narration with the vividness and urgency of spoken interaction

3.2. Modality

In Hemingway’s short story “The Killers”, modality plays a crucial role in shaping power relations and uncertainty within the dialogue-driven narrative. Although Hemingway employs a minimalist style, the selective use of modal verbs and modal expressions reveals the characters’ intentions, attitudes, and implicit threats. Consider the dialogue between George and one of the killers:

“You don’t have to get scared,” Al said. “He won’t hurt you.”

Here, the modal expression “have to” conventionally signals obligation or necessity (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). However, in this context, it functions ironically since Al is one of the armed killers controlling the situation, and positions himself as a reassuring figure while simultaneously maintaining dominance over George. The assurance is therefore manipulative rather than genuinely comforting. As Carter & McCarthy (2006) explain, modality in discourse often reflects interpersonal relations and speaker authority rather than merely grammatical necessity. Al’s statement minimizes George’s fear linguistically, yet the surrounding context, the killers’ presence, weapons, and threatening behaviour contradict the reassurance, creating tension between the literal meaning and the implied threat.

Similarly, the statement “He won’t hurt you” employs the modal auxiliary “will,” which typically expresses certainty or prediction. In this dialogue, however, the certainty conveyed by “will” is controlled by the killers themselves, because they determine who will or will not be harmed. The modal, therefore, reinforces the killers’ authority over the situation. The utterance appears comforting on the surface, but pragmatically it functions as a reminder that safety depends entirely on the killers’ decisions. Another example occurs when the killers discuss their plan:

“We’ll wait for him here,” Max said.

The modal “will” here functions not only as a marker of future action but also as an indicator of determination and commitment. According to Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), modal auxiliaries can express degrees of certainty, intention, and obligation in discourse. In this case, “we’ll wait” signals a fixed and deliberate plan, leaving little room for uncertainty or negotiation. This contributes to the atmosphere of inevitability because the killers speak with absolute confidence about their actions, while the other characters remain passive and uncertain. The certainty embedded in the modal construction contrasts sharply with the powerless responses of George and Nick, thereby reinforcing the asymmetrical power relations in the story.

From a discourse perspective, modality in “The Killers” functions beyond grammatical expression of futurity or obligation. Instead, it operates as a discourse strategy that encodes authority, intimidation, and control. Through modal choices, Hemingway allows the killers to dominate the conversational space, while the other characters are linguistically positioned as vulnerable and reactive.

3.3. Deixis

Deixis in the short story “The Killers” is crucial for situating the characters within the confined space of Henry’s lunchroom and for underscoring the immediacy of the interactions. Hemingway’s use of personal, spatial, and temporal deixis functions not merely to orient the reader but also to enhance the tension and confinement in the narrative. According to Levinson (1983), deixis establishes the relationship between language and context by locating participants, events, and spaces relative to the speaker’s perspective. In discourse, deictic expressions therefore contribute not only to reference but also to the construction of social and psychological positioning. A key example of spatial deixis occurs when the killers are introduced:

“This is a nice little town,” said one of the men. “We just stopped here on our way.”

The deictic expressions “this” and “here” position the town of the killers’ immediate spatial perspective. Rather than describing the town as a familiar or meaningful place, the deixis frames it as a temporary point of reference within their journey. As Halliday & Hasan (1976) argue, spatial deixis often reflects the speaker’s orientation toward place and social belonging. In this context, the killers’ language suggests detachment from the community because the town is treated merely as a location for carving out violence rather than as a socially significant environment. The temporary and transactional nature of their presence is reinforced by the phrase “on our way,” which implies movement and lack of attachment.

Personal deixis also contributes to the shifting dynamics between characters. Consider the killers addressing George:

“You talk too much,” Al said to George.

The pronoun “you” directly identifies George as the target of criticism and control. According to Brown & Gilman (1960), personal pronouns in interaction can reflect power relations and social hierarchy. In this exchange, the killers repeatedly employ second-person deixis in imperative and evaluative statements, while George responds defensively and briefly. This imbalance positions the killers as dominant speakers who control the discourse, which George is linguistically reduced to a reactive and subordinate role. The deixis, therefore, functions not simply as reference but as a mechanism of interpersonal control. Temporal deixis appears in the killers’ planning:

“We’re going to kill a Swede. Do you know a big Swede named Ole Andreson?”

The present progressive construction “we’re going to” signals an imminent action which has already been planned. Carter & McCarthy (2006) explain that future-oriented constructions in discourse often create a sense of immediacy because they bring anticipated events psychologically closer to the present moment. Here, the killers speak of murder as a fixed and inevitable action, which intensifies suspense within the narrative. The temporal framing compresses the distance between present conversation and future violence, thereby creating what Simpson (2004) describes as “narrative pressure” in which readers become aware of approaching danger before the characters can respond to it.

From a Grammar in Discourse perspective, deixis in the short story “The Killers” does more than indicate reference; it functions as a discursive strategy of control, othering, and temporal pressure. By manipulating spatial and temporal frames, the killers define the scene according to their own perspective, leaving the townspeople with limited discursive agency. Hemingway’s use of deixis, therefore, contributes significantly to the atmosphere of tension and confinement that characterizes the story.

3.4. Ellipsis

Ellipsis is one of the most distinctive grammatical features in Hemingway’s prose, and in the short story “The Killers”, it serves as a powerful discourse strategy. The omission of words, particularly in dialogue, creates a sense of brevity, tension, and understatement, forcing readers to infer meaning from what is left unsaid. According to Carter & McCarthy (2006), ellipsis in spoken discourse frequently functions as a marker of conversational economy, in which speakers omit predictable elements because meaning can

be recovered from context. Hemingway adopts this spoken-discourse pattern to produce realistic and compressed interaction. Consider the exchange between George and the killers:

“What do you want to eat?” George asked.
“I don’t know,” one of the men said. “What do you got?”

The expression “What do you got?” represents a colloquial spoken construction that differs from the more formally standard written form “What do you have?”. Rather than functioning as a grammatical error, the expression reflects the informal and conversational character of spoken American English. Carter & McCarthy (2006) note that spoken grammar often contains reduced or contextually economical forms that would be less common in formal written discourse. In Hemingway’s dialogue, this colloquial structure contributes to the realism of the interaction and reinforces the killers’ brusque and dismissive manner of speaking. The shortened form creates a rapid conversational rhythm, which intensifies the tense atmosphere of the diner scene. Another instance appears in Nick’s conversation with Ole Andreson:

“I can’t do anything about it,” Ole Andreson said.
“Tell me what you want me to do.”
“There isn’t anything to do.”

Here, the ellipsis is less structural than semantic, since Ole Andreson’s responses remain intentionally minimal and emotionally restrained. His refusal to elaborate suggests resignation and emotional withdrawal. As Simpson (2004) argues, minimal utterances in literary dialogue often function pragmatically to imply meaning that remains unspoken. The repetition of short, elliptical structures, therefore, conveys Ole Andreson’s acceptance of fate and reinforces the fatalistic atmosphere of the story.

From a discourse perspective, ellipsis functions in two significant ways. First, it creates economy and tension: the killers’ abbreviated speech efficiency intimidates, while Ole Anderson’s truncated responses signal despair and passivity. Second, ellipsis promotes readers’ engagement by compelling readers to infer unstated meanings and emotional subtext. This aligns with Hemingway’s “iceberg theory” in which deeper meaning resides beneath the surface of sparse language (Benson, 1990; Nagel, 1996).

Thus, ellipsis in the short story “The Killers” demonstrates how grammatical omission becomes both a stylistic and pragmatic device, shaping the rhythm of dialogue, the psychological atmosphere, and the interpretive involvement of the reader.

3.5. Voice

The use of voice, particularly the contrast between active and passive constructions, plays a subtle yet significant role in the short story “The Killers”. Hemingway’s minimalist style privileges direct, active sentences; however, when passive or agentless constructions appear, they often reflect helplessness, inevitability, or detachment from agency. According to (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) active voice foregrounds the agent performing an action, while passive construction backgrounds or suppresses agency. In discourse, this distinction can contribute to representations of power and control. An important example occurs when the killers announce their plan:

“We’re going to kill a Swede. Do you know a big Swede named Ole Andreson?”

This statement is expressed in the active voice, with the killers explicitly positioned as grammatical subjects and agents of the action (“We’re going to kill”). The construction foregrounds their authority since they present themselves as active decision-makers who control both the action and its outcome. Fairclough (1989) argues that foregrounded agency in discourse often reflects social power, since dominant speakers are linguistically represented as initiators of action rather than passive participants. In this exchange, the killers openly articulate their intention without hesitation or mitigation, which reinforces their dominance over the interaction.

The bluntness of the active construction also contributes to the threatening atmosphere of the scene; rather than concealing or softening the action, the killers directly verbalize violence, thereby controlling not only the discourse but also the emotional tone of the conversation. George and the other

townspeople, by contrast, respond briefly and cautiously, which further intensifies the asymmetry of power. In contrast, passive voice (or its implied presence through omission of agents) emerges when townspeople respond:

“He’s been here before today?”
“No, he hasn’t been here.”

Although these sentences are grammatically active, the discourse focus shifts away from the speakers themselves and centres instead on Ole Andreson as the object of inquiry. The townspeople do not direct or control the interaction; rather, they merely provide information in response to the killers’ questions. This reflects what Simpson (2004) describes as “backgrounded agency,” where characters become linguistically reactive rather than proactive. More explicitly, agentless or passive-like constructions arise in Ole Andreson’s resigned statement:

“There isn’t anything to do.”

Here, agency is erased. No grammatical subject assumes responsibility for action, and the structure presents the situation as unavoidable. Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) note that agentless constructions often create an impression of inevitability because actions appear detached from human responsibility. In the short story “The Killers”, this reinforces the existential fatalism of the story; violence is represented not as personal choice but as something that will inevitably occur.

From a Grammar in Discourse perspective, active constructions in the story are associated with authority, agency, and control, particularly in the killers’ speech. By contrast, passive or agentless constructions reflect helplessness, resignation, and lack of control among the townspeople and Ole Andreson. This contrast reinforces the asymmetrical relationships between characters and mirrors the broader existential undertones of Hemingway’s narrative style.

3.6. Synthesis of Findings from the Analysis

The analysis of Hemingway’s short story “The Killers” demonstrates that grammatical choices in the narrative are closely interconnected in shaping meaning, character relations, and atmosphere. Rather than functioning as isolated linguistic structures, grammatical features, such as tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, and voice, work together to create the story’s tension, fatalism, and sense of psychological confinement.

The use of tense contributes significantly to the contrast between narrative detachment and conversational immediacy. The dominance of the simple past tense in narration presents events in a restrained and objective manner, while the present-oriented dialogue draws readers directly into the unfolding interaction. This contrast creates a reading experience in which the violence feels both distant and immediate at once.

Similarly, modality reinforces power relations between characters. Expressions such as “we’re going to kill a Swede” and “you don’t have to get scared” demonstrate how modal constructions communicate certainty, authority, and implicit threat. The killers consistently use confident and assertive modal forms, whereas George, Nick, and Ole Andreson respond with hesitant or limited expressions. As a result, grammar becomes a marker of dominance and vulnerability within the discourse.

Deixis further intensifies the atmosphere of confinement. Spatial references, such as “this town” and “here,” confine the narrative space, while temporal expressions create anticipation of violence that feels increasingly unavoidable. Meanwhile, readers are positioned in the same restricted environment as the characters, whose experiences heighten the claustrophobic tension of the story.

Ellipsis also plays a central role in shaping meaning. Hemingway’s abbreviated dialogue and omission of explanatory details force readers to infer emotional and psychological implications from silence and incomplete utterances. This reflects Hemingway’s “iceberg theory,” where much of the meaning remains beneath the surface of the text. The sparse grammatical style, therefore, increases reader involvement because interpretation depends on what is left unsaid as much as on what is explicitly stated.

Finally, the contrast between active and passive or agentless constructions contributes to the thematic opposition between power and helplessness. The killers frequently use active constructions that foreground their agency and control, while Ole Andreson’s speech often lacks clear agency, reflecting resignation and inevitability. In this way, grammatical structure mirrors the existential fatalism that underlies the narrative.

Taken together, these findings show that grammar in discourse functions as a meaning-making resource that shapes how readers experience the story emotionally and psychologically. The grammatical economy of Hemingway’s prose, through brevity, omission, and directness, creates an atmosphere of menace because readers constantly sense implied violence beneath the sparse dialogue. At the same time, the limited agency expressed in passive or elliptical structures contributes to a feeling of futility, as characters appear unable to escape the situation unfolding around them

To make these findings clearer and more accessible, they can be summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Summary of Findings

| Feature of grammar in discourse | Function in short story “the killers” | Implication for meaning |
|--|---|--|
| Tense (past simple tense, present simple tense) | They serve as discourse tools that guide the reader’s experience, balancing the coldness of narration with the vividness of spoken interaction. | Contributes to the tension between detachment and immediacy, which is a hallmark of Hemingway’s style. |
| Modality (Possibility, Necessity, Inevitability) | Ole Anderson’s modal statements, such as “I can’t do anything about it.” | Expresses fatalism and resignation, reinforcing the atmosphere of inevitability |
| Deixis (Spatial, Temporal, Personal) | References to “here”, “now”, and “you” narrow the narrative scope | Create a sense of confinement, entrapment in a limited space and situation |
| Ellipsis (Omission of words/phrases) | Minimalist dialogue with frequent omissions | Builds tension and ambiguity, forces the reader to infer the missing meaning |
| Voice (Active, Passive, Agentless) | Killers use the active voice; victims often appear in passive or agentless constructions | Highlights agency distribution: killers as powerful, victims as powerless |
| Synthesis (interaction of features) | Features interact to construct an atmosphere of menace and futility | Highlights agency distribution: killers as powerful, victims as powerless |

The table above presents the findings of the analysis of Hemingway’s short story “The Killers” through Grammar in Discourse, which reveals that grammar operates not as a static system of rules but as a dynamic resource for meaning-making within the context. Each feature is identified as tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, and voice, which contribute to the texture of the narrative; their true significance emerges from the way they interact in discourse.

Hemingway’s minimalist prose style foregrounds this interaction. Short story “The Killers’ use of tense (past simple and present simple) does not function merely as grammatical structures but as markers of power that structure the social hierarchy within the café. Similarly, Ole Anderson’s modal expressions (“I can’t do anything about it”) highlight not simply possibility or necessity but a broader existential resignation. This indicates how grammar is shaped by, and simultaneously shapes, the pragmatic conditions of interaction.

The integration of deixis demonstrates how grammar situates characters in relation to space, time, and one another. In Hemingway’s narrative, deixis narrows the setting, producing a sense of entrapment. When combined with ellipsis, the omission of words and reliance on silences further constrain interpretive space, forcing the reader to confront the tension of what remains unsaid. Voice, finally, dramatizes the asymmetry of agency: active constructions empower the killers, while passive or agentless forms render Ole Anderson and the townspeople powerless.

Taken together, these findings illustrate the core principle of Grammar in Discourse: grammar is inseparable from meaning, context, and interaction. Hemingway’s short story “The Killers” exemplifies how grammatical choices cannot be reduced to isolated syntactic forms but must be understood in relation to social roles, narrative perspective, and communicative intent.

Moreover, the study highlights the pedagogical value of Grammar in Discourse. Analysing how grammar contributes to tension and atmosphere in literary texts demonstrates to students that grammar

is not only about correctness, but also about stylistic, pragmatic, and interpretive functions. These bridges the gap between form and meaning are as central to discourse-oriented grammar teaching.

4. Pedagogical Implications

The study highlights that grammar in discourse is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a valuable pedagogical resource. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of incorporating authentic and interactionally rich materials in language teaching to enhance pragmatic awareness (Kendrick, 2022; Stivers et al., 2022; Kääntä & Haddington, 2020). By connecting grammatical analysis with meaning-making, teachers can transform grammar learning into an engaging, interpretive, and critical activity. The findings from the discourse-based grammatical analysis of Hemingway's short story "The Killers" provide significant insights for language pedagogy.

The pedagogical implication of the present study is consistent with the findings of Marlini et al. (2022), who reported that English language learners recognize the importance of grammar in spoken discourse and express a need for contextualized grammar instruction. By analysing literary texts such as Hemingway's "The Killers", students can observe how grammatical features function in authentic discourse contexts and contribute to meaning construction, characterization, and interaction.

Referring to the result of the analysis (tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, and voice) in Hemingway's short story "The Killers" can be used for practice, asking students to identify where grammar obstructs meaning and then discuss its impact. Therefore, this analysis not only contributes to linguistics and literature but also to language pedagogy. In the teaching process, it can be used as a model for classroom activities (such as teaching grammar, reading between the lines, and so on) through grammar in discourse. It can be taught to undergraduate students majoring in English in the 4th or 5th semester, especially for those who have taken the Introduction to General Linguistics subject. It is also suitable for Stylistics or SFL classes. Several implications can be drawn as follows:

4.1. Integrating Grammar with Context

The analysis demonstrates that grammatical features such as tense, modality, deixis, ellipsis, and voice derive their full meaning only when used in discourse. In classroom teaching, this suggests that grammar should not be presented as a set of isolated rules but rather as resources that serve within authentic texts. Teachers can design activities for students to enlarge how tense, modality, or deixis shape meaning in real communicative contexts.

4.2. Encouraging Critical Reading through Grammar

The study demonstrates that grammar in the short story "The Killers" encodes power, agency, and fatalism through specific discourse patterns identified in the analysis. For example, the killers' repeated use of active constructions and assertive modal expressions, such as "*We're going to kill a Swede*" and "*We'll wait for him here,*" foregrounds their authority and control over the situation. In contrast, Ole Andreson's agentless and minimal responses, particularly "*There isn't anything to do,*" reflect resignation and lack of agency. Similarly, Hemingway's frequent use of ellipses and truncated dialogue, such as "*What do you got?*" or "*I don't know,*" creates tension by leaving meanings partially unstated and forcing readers to infer emotional implications from silence and brevity.

These findings can be applied pedagogically by guiding students toward critical reading of Hemingway's short story "The Killers". Teachers may encourage students to ask questions such as: *How does active voice reveal who holds power? How does ellipsis contribute to suspense and emotional restraint?* Through such discourse-oriented analysis, grammar instruction moves beyond sentence-level correctness and becomes a tool for interpretive reading and critical thinking. Students are encouraged not only to identify grammatical

structures but also to examine how those structures shape meaning, characterization, and reader response within literary discourse.

4.3. Promoting Stylistic Awareness

Hemingway's minimalist style, conveyed through ellipsis and silence, illustrates how grammar choices shape literary style. Teachers can encourage students to notice stylistic effects of grammar and even experiment with producing similar effects in their writing. This fosters stylistic sensitivity alongside grammatical competence.

4.4. Bridging Literature and Language Teaching

Using literary texts, such as Hemingway's short story "The Killers," highlights the value of grammar-in-discourse analysis in literature classrooms. Teachers of both linguistics and literature can show students how grammar underpins theme, character, and atmosphere. This interdisciplinary approach enriches students' understanding of both language and literature.

4.5. Application in Classroom Practice

The use of short stories in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms is an effective strategy for enhancing grammar learning. The rich context within short stories provides students with meaningful opportunities to engage with authentic language and develop their grammatical competence (Sedubun & Nurhayati, 2024). However, the successful use of stories in English teaching also depends on effective teaching strategies and teacher competence. Teachers need to choose stories that are linguistically and culturally appropriate for their students (Satriani, 2019).

The steps that can be applied in practical teaching activities might include: (1) Discourse-based grammar tasks: Students identify deixis in dialogues and discuss how it limits perspective, (2) Role-play and rewriting: Students rewrite parts of dialogue with different modality (such as 'might' changed into 'must') or voice ('active voice' changed into 'passive voice') to see how meaning changes, and (3) Close reading with grammar focus: Students analyse how omissions or silences contribute to tension and students ask to take note what kinds of tenses used in every line, then discussed the effects of detached narration and immediacy.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that grammatical features in Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers" provide important discourse strategies that shape narrative meaning, character relations, and reader experience. The analysis revealed that the use of the simple past tense in narration creates a detached and objective narrative tone, while present-oriented dialogue contributes to immediacy and conversational tension. Modal expressions such as "*We're going to kill a Swede*" and "*We'll wait for him here*" reinforce the killers' authority and create a sense of inevitability, whereas Ole Andreson's response, "*There isn't anything to do,*" reflects resignation and helplessness through agentless structure and limited modality.

The study also showed that deixis, particularly spatial expressions such as "this town" and "here," contributes to the atmosphere of confinement and psychological pressure. In addition, Hemingway's frequent use of ellipses and abbreviated dialogue, such as "What do you got?" and "I don't know," creates tension by leaving meanings partially unstated and requiring readers to infer emotional implications from silence and brevity. The contrast between the active constructions used by the killers and the townspeople's passive or reactive speech further reinforces the asymmetrical power relations in the story.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that grammar in discourse operates not only as a formal linguistic system but as a meaning-making resource embedded in context. Hemingway's minimalist style relies on grammatical economy, omission, and directness to create suspense, fatalism, and emotional restraint. Through these discourse patterns, the story

conveys violence and psychological tension not only through plot but also through its linguistic structure.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study suggests that grammar teaching should move beyond isolated rules and decontextualized exercises toward discourse-based approaches. Literary texts such as Hemingway's short story "The Killers" provide valuable opportunities for students to examine how grammatical choices shape characterization, tension, and reader interpretation. Integrating grammar and discourse analysis into language teaching can therefore foster grammatical awareness, critical reading, and stylistic sensitivity simultaneously.

In conclusion, applying grammar in discourse to literary analysis helps bridge the gap between linguistic structure and interpretive meaning. By examining how grammar functions within authentic literary discourse, learners and readers gain a deeper understanding of how language constructs human interaction, narrative tension, and thematic complexity

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