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# Transitivity Analysis in Academic Writing: A Case Study of *Feminist, Female, Feminine*

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# ABSTRACT

As one of the metafunctions in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), experiential meaning plays a vital role in interpreting texts. The transitivity system identifies the experiential meaning and captures how reality is construed by manifold linguistics choices. Despite the widespread application of Holliday's transitivity system, academic discourse receives far less attention than it deserves. In response, the study is set to analyze an extracted passage from the academic essay *The Feminist Reader* and to reveal the author's underlying ideology of feminism by using the transitivity system as a theoretical framework. Among the six processes outlined in the framework, the study discovers that relational processes highly dominate writing, distantly followed by material, while verbal and mental processes respectively come third. Moreover, it is the genre and register of academic writing and the author's writing intentions that contribute to different proportions of processes. In addition to exploring those hidden reasons, it is admitted that the transitivity choices the author makes are covert manifestations of her perspective on femininity.

Keywords: transitivity system, academic discourse, The Feminist Reader, femininity

### Introduction

Experiential meaning, as one of the metafunctions in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), plays a vital role in interpreting texts. The system of Transitivity identifies the experiential meaning and captures how reality is construed by manifold linguistics choices (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004:170).

Given the significance of transitivity in linguistics, scholars have applied it to various aspects. Firstly, news reports (see Ebeling, 2021) and literature works (see Nguyen, 2018) are most welcomed by them. For instance, Feng and Hong (2022) conducted a transitivity analysis of headlines of China-related news in *The New York Times* to reveal the attitude of *The New York Times* towards China. Yang and Zhong (2020) put transitivity to examine linguistic features as well as the writer's ecosophy in *The Call of The Wild*. Apart from that, education discourses and political discourses (see Pefiuelas, 2022) merit much attention as well. Yu and Wang (2020) intend to provide pedagogical implications by constructing an analytical framework for ecological transitivity analysis. Munalim (2017) explores the mental process produced by teachers in writing reflection papers and claims that this process manifests teachers' inner world occurrence. Zhou (2019) makes transitivity theory in interpreting political discourse. Moreover, the transitivity structure is used in psychology. For example, Tsirogianni and Sammut (2014) propose a framework to examine social value, particularly in views that carry various styles and meanings. Besides, the transitivity system is implemented in ESP (medical-dental) research (Vathanalaoha and Tangkiengsirisin, 2018: 640).

Throughout the above analysis, it can be found that little is known about the relationship between the transitivity system and academic writing. In essence, it reveals that the research gap concerning transitivity analysis on academic writing does exist among domestic academia. To the best of our knowledge, academic writing plays a quite significant role in producing knowledge since an "author's main task is to communicate new knowledge" (Fløttum et al., 2006: 19). Given the established niche in studies concerning transitivity analysis of academic writing, this paper, taking Toril Moi's essay for example, aims to reveal the essential significance of the transitivity theory in interpreting academic writing. To be more specific, this paper is conducted to solve the following four questions:

- a. What are the characteristics of processes in the transitivity system in academic writing?
- b. Why are such features formulated in academic writing?
- c. How does the transitivity analysis help to achieve the author's writing purpose?
- d. Is there any author's ideology hidden in transitivity analysis? If there is, how does the author achieve it?

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Systemic Functional Linguistics (often SFL) is a pivotal framework for describing and modelling language as a resource for making meaning and choices. It serves as an approach to language developed by M.A.K. Halliday and his followers during the 1960s in the United Kingdom, and later in Australia (O'Donnell, 2012: 2).

First and foremost, SFL is more comprehensive and systemic than other linguistics traditions. On the one hand, it values language functions rather than structures. In other words, language choices speakers/writers make are the results of language meanings they intend to express. On the other hand, SFL separates language choices and language structures, providing a comprehensive framework for explaining variation and relating to the discourse context. Concerning the fact that language is a network of dynamic and open systems, systemic networks of language are established based on three functions of constituents in a clause, which enlightens us to explore in detail how resources of the language have been used to construct the meaning.

In addition, SFL offers a method to establish the language as social semiotic, which contributes to interacting language and context and approaching authentic language in context. To be more specific, according to SFL, the meaning of texts is determined by three factors, including the context of culture, context of situation and metafunctions of language. In view of the context of culture and situation, they can be realized by register and genre. Register accounts for recognizable configurations of wordings speakers deploy, while genre applies the tenet to more communicative situations. They both show the role of grammar in offering conventionally accepted wordings to express our feelings, providing clearer guidance for what the grammar of a language covers. Besides, variation in linguistic choices within contexts is also discussed in SFL in the notion of register. Given the characteristic of meaning-making in language use, speakers/writers, depending on what is going on (field), whom we are interacting with (tenor), and the role language is playing(mode), would make different choices in grammar. As for metafunctions of language, they can be classified into ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions, which can be realized in every clause we speak or write. In a clause, speakers always construe their experience(ideational), establish close relations with listeners(interpersonal), and associate the messages with their following contents (textual). The three categories are the basis for exploring how meanings are created and understood, for allowing each function congruent with particular types of wordings to an extent that other categorizations generally do not. In a sense, those three elaborated roles in functional grammar are extraordinarily crucial to reveal the complexity of meanings always construed in each use of language.

To a greater extent, it is those distinctive features shared by SFL that make it an applicable vehicle. For instance, Schleppegrell (2011) proves that SFL analysis has been applied to education, academic and professional contexts, clinical contexts, critical discourse, media analysis, literary texts and so on and so forth. In other words, SFL offers a "way in" by providing concrete tools for

exploring language comprehensively and for making sense of discourse data.

#### **Results and Discussion**

*Feminist, Female, Feminine* is an academic paper collected in *The Feminist Reader.* The chosen text for making transitivity analysis is an excerpt from the whole passage. In the chosen text, the author Toril Moi endeavours to make a clear definition of "feminist". In terms of the final results of transitivity analysis, it can be concluded into three points based on the form and content of this academic writing. To be more specific, as for the form of academic writing, it can be found that the relational process is the most dominant process in academic writing. Moreover, it is the genre, registers and writing intentions of the passage that contribute to different proportions of processes. Speaking of the content of this academic paper, it is admitted that the transitivity choices the author makes are covert manifestations of her ideology towards femininity.

No	Process Types	Quantity	Percentage
1	Material	23	23%
2	Mental	12	12%
3	Relational	38	39%
4	Behavioural	6	6%
5	Verbal	15	15%
6	Existential	5	5%
Total		99	100%

Figure 1: The Total Quantity and Percentage of Process Types

Based on the results of transitivity analysis, it can be concluded that the relational process dominates academic writing. To be more specific, as is shown in Figure 1, the most dominant process is the relational process and the secondary one is the material process, accounting for 39% and 23% respectively. In contrast, existential process and behavioural process occupy the least, sharing 5% and 6% respectively. As for verbal and mental processes, they have similar percentages, that is, 15% and 12%.

In response to the above distributions of processes, it is worth noting that genre and register determine different propositions of processes. As have mentioned, the chosen text serves as an academic paper, whose genre type is an argumentation. Given the fact that genre influences academic writing since there are specific 'discourse formats' and 'writing traditions' that the author needs to abide by when producing knowledge (Fløttum et al., 2006: 22), the author is supposed to follow disciplines of argumentation, which, to some extent, exerts an impact on the author to make choices of processes in his or her work.

To conform to the principle of interaction in writing (Hyland, 1990, 2000, 2005, 2009), the relational process achieves the highest frequency in academic writing. Given the fact that "academic writers embrace elements of the scientific and educational discourses" (Szymańska, 2013: 5), it can be said that spreading and interacting with new knowledge are major functions of academic writing. Therefore, it is quite understandable for academic writers to give definitions of abstract concepts by demonstrating traits of identities, which illustrates the most dominant usage of a relational process in academic discourse results from the tenor challenge in its register as well. In other words, the power between readers and authors

is unequal so that the latter, as 'experts' in their passage, would spend much text explaining their perspective to readers. Returning to the chosen excerpt, the author proposes her writing purpose in the beginning, that is, to characterize and identify the concept of "feminist". Later, by resorting to relational processes, such as, "the words 'feminist' or 'feminism' are political labels", and "feminist criticism and theory must be relevant to the study of the social" power relations, she points out political and social features of "feminist".

Furthermore, resorting to material process helps academic writers simplify difficult views and therefore evoke readers' resonance and interest. As is known, the complexity of academic writing is attributed to the technical language of the field challenge in its register because such language is probably only accessible to insiders in the professional area. In this regard, it is understandable that the material process contributes to the second largest proportion in academic writing on the grounds that they are related to individuals' experiences and therefore can easily familiarize readers a lot. In terms of this chosen excerpt, mainly discusses the terminology "feminist" in literature, which is relatively difficult to understand and may puzzle readers who are foreign to literature academia. As a result, in order to help them to better grasp the information, the author resorts to material process to illustrate her view of "feminism". For instance, when introducing the relationship between feminist and women's movement: "the words 'feminist' or 'feminism' are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new women's movement which emerged in the later 1960s", the author uses "emerge", the marker referring to the material process, to engage readers to recall their memories of new women's movement so as to establish the bridge between femininity and the political event in readers' mind. In addition, the cumulation of material process in academic writing is quite revealing in light of power relations in the tenor challenge of its register as well. It is more influential to exert one's power within the domain of 'doing' rather than 'sensing', 'saying', or 'behaving' because it is not easy to impact how people think, compared with using physical force to influence how they act (qtd. in Darani, 2014: 184). As for this chosen text, it is reasonable that the author, as the "Propagator", prefers employing material processes to persuade readers to accept her view of "feminism" and therefore to impact their actions and minds.

In addition, it is worthwhile noting that verbal processes and mental processes, as the third frequently used processes in academic writing, "allow for interpersonal intervention" (Martinez, 2001: 238) and interaction for information exchange. In academic discourse, it is commonly believed that there is low affective involvement in the tenor challenge of its register in that the tone of academic writing is supposed to be objective and impersonal so as to convince readers. Nevertheless, excessive impersonality does damage to engage readers' attention and evoke their feelings. In this regard, academic writers always resort to mental and verbal processes to invite readers to engage in their world in that these processes offer a spectrum of possibilities that allow the writer to express personal ideas through first-person intervention (238). Taking this chosen excerpt for instance: the author "insist(s) that recognizable feminist criticism and theory must be relevant to the study of the social, institutional and personal power relations...". Here, the word "insist" indicates a mental process, which offers opportunities for the author to express her attitude towards feminist criticism and to negotiate this idea with her readers. Moreover, when illustrating "appropriation" phenomena in the sense of creative transformation, the author first shows feminists' despise against men's misbehaviour of "stealing" women's ideas, later she takes Dale Spender for example to demonstrate that women are appropriating others' ideas as well. After reviewing the pervasive phenomena in academia, she advocates, "But can we accuse men of 'stealing' women's ideas if we at the same time argue

vociferously for the feminist appropriation of everybody's ideas?" In this case, the word "accuse", referring to the verbal process, used in an interrogative way, functions to invite readers to participate in the "questioning task" and to help them recognize feminists' misunderstandings of 'appropriation', which is in parallel with the author's original purpose as well. Furthermore, mental and verbal processes are used by the author to give a brief review of feminists' contamination' by patriarchal ideology. For example, "Mary Wollstonecraft was inspired by the male-dominated ideas of the French Revolution, or Simone de Beauvoir was deeply influenced by Sartre's phallocentric categories when she wrote *The Second Sex*. Nor is it necessary to refuse to recognize John Stuart Mill's efforts to rethink the oppression of women...". Here, words like "inspire", "influence" and "recognize" indicate the mental process, and the word "rethink", referring to the verbal process, is strong evidence of the author's intention to emphasize not "the origins of an idea, but the usage and effects it can produce", supporting the idea that verbal and mental processes contribute to leading to the author's positioning (241).

When it comes to the existential process, it is comprehensible for authors to less likely to use it in academic discourse. The "existential process represents that something exists or happens" (Halliday, M.A.K et al, 2004). In other words, the existential process is predominantly concerned with existing phenomena or events. In contrast, in academic writing, the main task is to excavate essence from surface facts and to communicate new knowledge, which is incompatible with the existential process. Take this excerpt for instance, an existential process that functions to signify something occurs and exists is used in five clauses, where the word "there" is used to denote "the character of existence" (Anjarwati, Rosi et al, 2021: 5). "There are, of course, different political views within the feminist camp", the author here points out the fact that manifold political views do exist in feminist groups. Nevertheless, her real purpose is not just to state the fact, but to disclose the deep truth, that is, "sexual politics", underneath superficial phenomena. In another case, "the fact there are no purely female intellectual traditions available to us is not as depressing as it might have been", the function of the existential process is more obvious. In this clausal group, the clause "there are ...", signifying the existential process, serves to show the content of the superficial fact that the author discusses, but more importantly, functions to modify the depressing effect the fact produces.

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Process Types	Quantity	Percentage	
Identifying	19	50%	
Attributive	19	50%	
Total	38	100%	

Figure 2: The Quantity and Percentage of Subcategories of Relational Process

Apart from interpreting various share of processes, it should not be overlooked that genre theory and the author's writing purpose exert essential influence on distributing subcategories of relational process. According to Figure 2, it can be noticed that identifying relational process and attributive relational process account for the same proportion in this chosen excerpt, which is determined by genre theory and the author's writing aim. To be more specific, as mentioned at the beginning of this academic writing, the author clearly demonstrates that she purports to characterize and identify the core meaning of "feminist", that is, "Recognizable feminist criticism and theory must in some way be relevant to the study of the social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes--sexual politics". In case of supporting the claim, she later provides grounds for the claim. On one hand, "Feminists have to be pluralistic", which corresponds to the feature of the attributive relational process. On the other hand, through creative transformation--appropriation, feminists should have distinctive impacts on patriarchal power, which is congruent with identifying the relational process. To further affirm her claim, in the latter part of this passage, the author offers examples and comparisons to make a deeper analysis of those two concrete methods.

Besides the five types of the process presented earlier, the behavioural process is included in the excerpt as well and can be regarded as the most valuable process in the transitivity structure to represent the author's ideology. According to Hemas (2016), transitivity can be used to reveal the ideology "since it is a part of ideational metafunction" (28) which deals with issues about how someone views and experiences the world. In terms of the transitivity analysis of this chosen excerpt, despite the fact that it takes a relatively small share, the behavioural process serves as the most salient type of process to reflect the author's ideology about feminism. To be more specific, the whole passage is closely related to feminism, including females' oppression inflicted by patriarchal society and women's struggle to obtain their rights. Moreover, the author of this passage is a female as well. To some extent, the author, as a member of contemporary women who have witnessed such maltreatment posed to her sisterhood, would inevitably put personal feelings into her words. In addition to personal emotions, her gender has an impact on her writing style as well, supporting that "men pursue a style of interaction based on power, while women pursue a style based on solidarity and support" (Coates, 2004: 126). For instance, when declaring the original objective of associating political discourse with feminists, she indicates that it aims to "subvert the tacit acceptance of patriarchal power politics". Here, the word "subvert", epitomizing behavioural process, reflects the author's opinion towards females' resistance against the patriarchal order. To put it differently, she pins hopes on her sisterhood to defy phallocentric dominance not only physically but also mentally. That is to say, she dedicates herself to using her words to awaken her sisterhood: recognize the patriarchal trap acknowledge the value of themselves in their consciousness, and take concrete actions to fight against male dominance and for their due rights. Moreover, when disclosing men's unreasonable exploitation of women, the writer advocates, "men 'stealing' women's ideas". In this case, the word "stealing" shows the behaviour that symbolizes the psychological process of consciousness. To put it differently, the word exemplifies the meaning near to the mental process but is realized in the form of behaviour. In the author's opinion, males taking women's ideas as their own serves as mental subjugation imposed on females, but also brings about numerous physical sufferings on them, which represents the author's sympathy for her sisters and her rebellion against male-centered traditions.

# Conclusions

With the purpose of exploring the basic pattern of processes in academic writing and finding out the reason for it, a transitivity analysis is performed on the academic essay, *Feminist, Female, Feminine.* According to the exhaustive study, it can be summarized that the relational process is the most dominant process in academic writing, and the material process is the second most welcomed one in academic discourse. To a greater extent, the finding of this study makes great contributions to not only research significance but also practical meanings. That is to say, the study gives a detailed transitivity of an academic paper, which paves the way for enriching the current linguistics studies concerning academic writing. Furthermore, the finding of this research is believed to be applied in English for Academic Writing courses for teachers and students. As for teachers, they can put this finding to both their pedagogical career and their research studies. As for students, this finding is enlightening for them to better compose their academic papers.

Moreover, it is recognized that genre and register play important roles in deciding various proportions of processes. In terms of the highest frequency of the relational process, it is attributed to intrinsic features of academic writing. To put it bluntly, the major function of academic writing is to produce and communicate new knowledge. Apart from this, academic writing is an interactive project where writers spread their views to their audience in "recognizably acceptable ways, shaping their actions to the presumed understandings and needs of their readers" (Hyland, 2000, X), which affirms the unequal power between writers and readers, and therefore provides the reason why "preachers" put great efforts to illustrate to "the preached". It is on those bases that make it imperative for academic writers to take a larger part of their paper to identify or characterize distinctive properties of entities. As for the second dominant process, the material process is employed to simplify professional and complex definitions in academic discourse since it is related to humans" outer" experience of the world. In view of the relatively small distribution of verbal and mental processes, it is worthwhile noting that they are beneficial for academic writers to achieve interpersonal communication with their readers. Speaking of the existential process, it is seldom utilized in academic writing on the grounds that this process type signifies surface phenomena or existing facts and does not conform to the principle of revealing the deep essence in academic discourse.

In addition to analyzing reasons for various distributions of processes, one notable finding is that transitivity analysis is crucial to reveal authors' ideology. In other words, this paper creatively puts transitivity theory to further unearth the hidden ideology of the writer of the chosen excerpt, that is, sympathy for sisters and her rebellion against male dominance, which facilitates a better understanding of this passage. Therefore, this finding, emphasizing the interplay between transitivity configuration and writers' ideology, has further implications for researchers to take creative methods to make discourse analysis.

Despite the above findings, it is admitted that the paper still has some limitations. If more academic discourses are added, it is possible to make a more certain conclusion about the characteristics of academic writing. Additionally, comparative studies about the same topic, namely, femininity, between writers of different genders are missing, too. The suggestions for further study are the attempt to make a transitivity analysis of other academic papers written by male writers and then compare it with those written by female writers, aiming to better recognize the transitivity system's importance in revealing authors' hidden writing ideology.

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