

Multimodality in Literary Text
Lecture 8
Representing Action: Transitivity and Verb Processes
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Learning objective

At the end of this meeting, you are expected to understand:

1. Introduction to representing action through transitivity.
1. Six processes of transitivity model: Material, Behavioral, Mental, Verbal, Relational, Existential.
2. Case of representing people.

This lecture eight will be mainly sourced from the book Machin and Mayr entitled “How to Do CDA” in 2012. However additional references will be added from other books and journal articles. Examples will be made based on the topic discussed or taken from any relatable sources.

Last lecture focused on representing participants through the choices of language to define their identity. There was a detail discussion about ten categorizations of social actors. In this lecture, we will continue discussing how people can be framed by representational strategies and representation of transitivity. **Transitivity representation is how people are represented as doing something or doing nothing.** Just like the previous lecture’s discussion, this lecture will also serve discourses and ideologies that are concealed or not clearly stated in text.

Transitivity is a study about the depiction of **people as doing what to whom in what way** (Machin and Mayr, 2012). This process allows to reveal the actor and the recipient through the choice of clauses in a text, the actor who plays an important role, who does the action, and the recipient who got the consequences of that action. The use of transitivity in analyzing clause structure indicates who primarily acts as a subject or object position. Subject is so called as agent or participant, meanwhile object is the one who got affected or who becomes the patient (Machin and Mayr, 2012).

Halliday in her book Introduction to Functional Grammar (2004) emphasizes that the actor or participant can choose which language grammar to use according to the social circumstances. This is where the transitivity plays a significant role in making meaning of the language. It means that specific language choices always carry meanings, and they can also convey ideological messages. Language, as used in various discourses or mass media, is a tool that can influence our understanding about the world and shaping our everyday perceptions through its representations. Then, the **transitivity analysis** is a powerful basis to see both: **what is included in the text and excluded from the text.** For example, the significant changes of news headline from “Police killed a demonstrator” to “A demonstrator killed by police” to “A demonstrator killed.”

The change from active to passive conceals the actor or agent. As Van Dijk (2013) stated that the use of passive voice in discourses leaves the agent implicit as they are placed in the last part of the sentence. The use of passive voice can decrease or even erase the negative actions of the agents.

For example:

- a. She **was arrested**, of course, for stealing.
- b. People whose application to remain in Britain **had been turned down**.
- c. Presumably the £200 million a year cost that **was estimated**.
- d. Whose applications **have been rejected** time and again.
- e. **The assistance given** to these people **must be provided** in kind.

In contrast to the above statements about passive voice, active voice is often used to expose the minority group members, especially if they do bad things (van Dijk in Machin Mayr, 2012). Their role is not mitigated through passive voice, but strongly emphasized through active voice.

For example:

“Muslims win a transfer out of too ‘white’ jail.”

“Terrorism convicts granted move from ‘white’ jail.”

Both sentences express negativity toward the actor or agent in an active sentence form. The agent in the first sentence is mentioned as ‘Muslim’ while in the second one mentioned as ‘terrorist.’ This agent is exposed as something negative because prisoners should not be given any privileges, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or any other identities attached to them.

Machin and Mayr (2012) also elaborated the **three main aspects of meaning** when studying the agency (who does what to whom) and action (what happens):

1. Participants: can be individuals, objects, or ideas involved in the action.
2. Processes: represented by verbs which describe the actions.
3. Circumstances: can be in adverbs or prepositional phrases, that tells us where, when, and how the actions occur.

For example: The police shot a demonstrator this morning.

The participant or the actor is ‘the police’ who does the action of shooting, the goal or the object is ‘a demonstrator’ who is affected by the action of shooting, and the circumstance is ‘this morning’ which shows the context of time. Therefore, in transitivity analysis, we need to find the participants in a clause and the types of actions they perform. Halliday (2004, 282) introduced six processes of transitivity model:

3. **Material**: things happen (actor, process, and the goal)
4. **Behavioral**: actions or behavior process.
5. **Mental**: thoughts and emotions (senser, process, and phenomenon)
6. **Verbal**: speaking and communicating (the sayer, process, and receiver)

7. **Relational**: connections between the carrier, process, and attribute or value.
8. **Existential**: Existent process.

A. Material Processes

Material process elaborates a **process of doing** (Machin and Mayr, 2012). It involves actions, either concrete or abstract, that lead to a certain result. For example: "The police arrested the protestors." This process has two main participants, which are **the actor and the goal**. The actor is the one doing the action, while the goal is the one receiving the end of the action. Sometimes, there can be only an actor involved in material processes without the goal. For example: "She ran away". In another case, the goal can be very unclear, as in "The police attacked." There will be a significant difference compared to this sentence "The police attacked the demonstrators" where the goal is clearly stated. On the other side, actor can be missing through the use of passive clause. Fairclough in Machin and Mayr (2012) suggested that it is crucial to examine text where it is not clear enough who is doing the action and who is taking the responsibility of the action. For example:

The New York Times

2 Police Officers Killed in Connecticut After a Suspicious 911 Call

Figure 1 (Gold, M., et al., 2022)

It is the example of passive clause in a news headline where the actor is missing. No one is responsible for carrying the action. Who killed the two police officers? We can add the actor by modify the headline into "2 police officers killed in Connecticut by 2 black protestors." 2 black protestors are the actors of the killing action. However, they are placed at the last part of the sentence. As van Dijk mentioned (2013) that minority groups who act negatively are usually presented using passive sentence. The point is to set their role aside from the others and to put them as the suspects instead of victims.

Machin and Mayr (2012) added that material processes can also involve beneficiaries, such as when someone does something for someone else. For example, "The architects build the office building for a client," where "office building" is the goal and "client" is the beneficiary. Material processes can also be connected to something unaffected by the process, like "I am working on a research grant," where "research grant" is linked to the process but is not the main goal.

To summarize, it is important to examine the text more critically to see how material processes work, whether the participants in text are represented as actors, goals, or the process's beneficiaries. By criticizing the discourse in a text, we will be able to get a clear sense of a text, either in active or passive text.

B. Mental Processes

Mental process is elaborated as the process of sensing. It can be classified into three (Machin and Mayr, 2012):

1. **Cognition:** verbs use of thinking, knowing, and understanding
Example: I **understand** the instruction.
2. **Affection:** verbs use of liking, disliking, and fearing
Example: I **like** the storyline of the movie.
3. **Perception:** verbs use of seeing, hearing and perceiving
Example: I **saw** the gentlest parenting ever.

Through mental process, we can identify the feelings or thoughts of the participants in a text. For example: 'Women are often overthinking about their spouse cheating on them.' In mental processes, participants are often portrayed as the ones experiencing or reflecting on actions. They are given an inner perspective. This is a way to make readers or viewers connect emotionally with that person.

For example:

"All parents are worried and never want their teenagers' children to be part of free-sex and drugs cases."

The readers of this sentence are expected to have empathy to the parents' feelings as mentioned above. Especially if the readers are in the same situation where they also have children in teenager' age. Mental process can also show the participants appear to be very busy, even if they are not part of the concrete actions. If the mental verbs are related to sensing and reacting, they can convey passivity. So, in the above sentence, the parents are shown as they are representing the other parents. They are reflecting on their thoughts and feelings that other parents can be connected with their point of view. However, their role in the sentence remains passive as they are not actively performing physical actions.

In some cases, mental process talks not only about action but also **reaction**. In text, it is important of CDA learners to examine how it 'informs' us what we suppose to do, what had happened, and how we feel about the things happen. This is about how reactions are portrayed in discourses. In certain social contexts, reactions are more important than actions (Machin and Mayr, 2012). In a discourse, we might find a group being depicted as taking actions, murder suspect or example, while another group is shown reacting to these actions, for example the victim's family or the media or the public who read the news in media. Reactions can be found in the following expressions: "need", "want", "think", "know", "understand", "respond", "react", etc. However, reaction can be unclear if it does not mention the whole context. For example, "the judge responded." or "the court reacted." These two statements are concealing the actions as it is not clear what to respond or what to react.

C. Behavioral Processes

Behavioral process elaborates the physical and psychological aspects, such as: watching, tasting, staring, dreaming, breathing, coughing, smiling, and laughing (Machin and Mayr, 2012). They are somewhat a mix of material and mental processes. For instance, "look at" and "listen to" are considered behavioral processes, while "see" and "hear" fall into the mental category. Behavioral processes are also about

actions, but these actions are experienced by a single conscious being, like a person. For example, "we listened to loud music" is a behavioral process. However, actions in behavioral processes do not necessarily imply strong agency, and they don't always involve a clear goal or beneficiary.

D. Verbal Processes

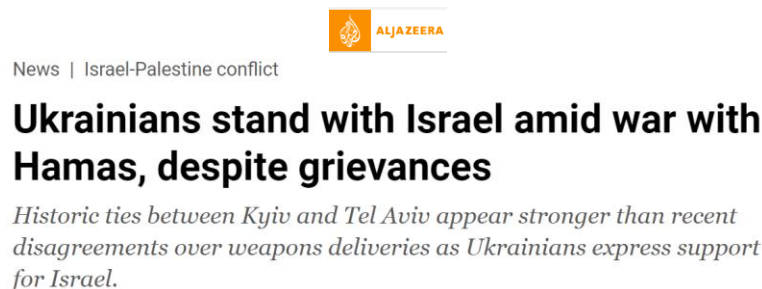
Verbal processes are expressed through the verb 'to say' and the other same meaning verbs. A verbal process typically consists of three participants: sayer, receiver, and verbiage (Machin and Mayr, 2012).

The **sayer** is the person or thing speaking which can be human or human-like, such as in "The lecturer taught about the CDA," or even an inanimate object/thing, like "the paper passed the maximum plagiarism percentage." The person or thing that the verbal process is directed at is called a **receiver**. For example, "They told me to leave at once." **Verbiage** is a way to express these verbal processes in noun way or change the verb into noun. For example, "the document provided a detailed account" or "he said that this was the case."

When analyzing text, we can look at which participants are represented as more closely linked to verbal processes. Those who are given a voice in the media might be the ones with more power representation. On the other hand, some participants can be portrayed as having too much to say. To understand the agency, it important to see who is depicted as performing the concrete actions with specific goals (material processes), and who is presented as thinkers and speakers (verbal processes).

E. Relational Processes

Relational processes in language convey information about states of being or how things relate to each other (Machin and Mayr, 2012). These processes often use the verb 'to be', but they can also involve words like 'become,' 'mean,' 'define,' 'symbolize,' 'represent,' 'stand for,' 'refer to,' 'mark,' or 'exemplify.' Additionally, the concept of 'having' something is a relational process, like in 'she has a new iPhone.' Relational processes help us present things as 'facts,' even if they could be seen as opinions. For instance, we can say 'a lot of people have worries about immigration' to express this as a statement of fact.





Forensic marking to protect England's shipwreck sites from thieves

Historic England announces scheme to deter would-be criminals from treasures at shipwreck sites

Figure 3 (Brown, M., 2023)

Above are the two examples of relational processes in news headlines. The first headline consists of 'stand with', meanwhile the second headline occurs a word 'marking' which also indicates the relational process.

F. Existential Processes

Existential processes represent that something exists or happens (Machin and Mayr, 2012). These processes use common verbs such as: exist, arise, or occur, and have only one participant in a sentence, like in "There is a fight between law enforcers and students." This participant, which indicated by 'there is' or 'there are', indicates a nominalized action or certain phenomenon. In the previous example, 'to fight' is changed into a nominalization 'a fight'. Even though the sentence mentions the agency or participants in the sentence but such kind of nominalization makes the responsibility of the 'fight' bias. How could it happen? Why did it happen? Why there should be a fight between them? If the sentence is simplified into "There is a fight", it is even more unclear which can be manipulated into any contexts. It is absurd what ideological function the sentence tries to serve. Return to the transitivity discussion which talks about actor-goal relationship in a discourse, the ideology can be examined through the backgrounded agency and the use of passive clause in it. Through passive clause, the actor-goal positions are switched, for example "the students were attacked by the law enforcers." In certain cases, the actor is completely omitted, such as "the students were attacked." The backgrounding effect can be even worse with the use of one-participant process, like "the students injured", where the injury cannot be associated to the law enforcers because it can be caused by many other reasons. This transitivity patterns, the agency manipulation through the use of certain language, are the important aspects of language and power (Machin and Mayr, 2012).

Multiple Diversions Occur at Manchester Airport Due to Damaged Runway

Figure 4 (Field, J., 2022)

This headline is taken from aviation source news website. This headline can be an example of existential processes with the use of 'occur' word in the sentence. It indicates what, how, and why the multiple diversions happened.

G. Adjuncts

The lexical choices or words to describe adjuncts, or additional details, have big effect on how people were seen as active participants in society. Adjuncts are simply lexical items or words that can be used to give more information about things as well as to modify them.

Machin and Mayr (2012) give an example of an article about midwives' role in the baby delivery process:

“Routinely **involved** in assessing and recording the extent of perineal trauma ... and being responsible for **initiating** appropriate interventions and treatment.”

The above part of article shows us that midwives do not have the capacity to assess, record, or do intervention. They are stated as part of the processes or at least to start the process but not becoming the executors nor the managers. Even if they are involved in the action with a material result, their function is still stepped aside by using the adjuncts ‘involved’ or ‘initiating’. Both adjuncts explain that midwives are not the leader in the action processes, they are just part of it.

This midwives' text also reveals the presence of main social agent but this agent is an unidentified third person. The presence is called through their business, such as ‘expecting’, ‘accepting’, and ‘recognizing’ about what should or should not be done by the midwives, or how they suppose to behave in a certain way. For example:

“Midwives are **expected** to make assessments regarding management of perineal trauma that are vitally important to the long-term health of women. It is common practice and a generally **accepted** rule within many maternity units. Perineal repair is **recognized** as a role of the midwife.”

It is not clearly mentioned who is doing the expecting and who accepts the rule. People in charge do not have any hidden powers overseeing or determining their role, and we did not find any missing actor like that in the obstetrics text.

Case of Representing Action



Figure 5 (Mellya, M.F., 2023, Netflix)

Talking about six processes of transitivity, it reminds me of the currently viral and controversial Netflix documentary entitled 'Ice Cold'. This documentary is filmed by a documentary director from England named Rob Sixsmith. It is a documenter film which brings the public to flash back to the 2016 cyanide murder case between Jessica and Mirna. Jessica was named as the perpetrator of the murder of her best friend, Mirna, by using cyanide poison in coffee. It was a very long way of trials which nationally taking public attention on news televisions and online media. What is interesting about this documentary is the way it summarizes this complicated case from the perspective of the relevant sources. 'Ice Cold' refreshes the public's memory about this case but from a different perspective.

This documentary can be a very interesting case for critical discourse analysis, specifically the transitivity analysis. As a discourse, this documentary succeeded in leading public opinion to the other side of this case. The way it rewinds the parts of trial recordings and display the parts of interviews with the respective sources, shows the transitivity process in a discourse as who does what to whom in what way. The transitivity representation in this documentary also portrays certain participants as doing something or not doing something. We can find many passive statements in which the agents or actors are concealed. I believe that analyzing this documentary with CDA, especially transitivity, will be a good research topic.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, we've highlighted the value of examining text to understand what participants are depicted as doing, both through language and visuals. This analysis helps us uncover the hidden messages within the text. We've introduced categories for breaking down actions, providing a more precise view of power dynamics, humanization, and other underlying issues tied to the text's ideology.

Furthermore, we've noted that there can be differences between how actions are represented linguistically and visually. For instance, a soldier might appear thoughtful and watchful in a visual representation, while the text describes them as behaving aggressively. In such cases, we can explore how these elements work together to convey specific discourses. One practical method for this analysis involves creating tables to compare the actions assigned to different participants.

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Figure 1

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Figure 2

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Figure 3

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Figure 4

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Figure 5

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