Using Transitivity as a Framework in a Stylistic Analysis

of Virginia Woolf’s *Old Mrs. Grey*

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**Abstract**
This paper shows how the use of some language resources can unravel to the reader the world view of the persona or the writer in a literary work. Drawing on Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), it attempts to make transitivity framework accessible to teachers of English as a second language (ESL). It aims to raise one’s awareness on the confluence of language structures in a prose written in the stream of consciousness (SOC) technique. Also, this paper shows the connection between linguistics and literature (Hişmanoğlu, 2005) by using an alternative framework within the context of a literature-based language program. This attempt is a step towards helping students understand how the language of a given text creates authenticity in fiction. This paper aims to illustrate how a reader can capture the elusive and subjective mind style of the author or the persona by attending to the author’s linguistic choices.

**Key words:** literature as language, Systemic Functional Grammar, transitivity, mind style, narrative structure, and literary competence

**Introduction**
Linguistic competence in teaching literature is a prerequisite in analyzing, interpreting, and appreciating literary works. To Sebeok, “A linguist who is deaf to poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unconversant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms” (Weber 1996, p. 33). Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to encounter students who fail to apply concepts from linguistics in analyzing and interpreting authentic literary pieces.
In contrast, those who can use a working knowledge of the language system enjoy a greater capacity for insightful awareness of the effects of language produced by literary texts. Hence, their commentary on the effects produced in a literary work becomes more objective which can be tested and retrieved with greater degree of reliability. Given the said condition, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

(1) How may literature teaching be linguistically informed by using the SFL framework?

(2) How may transitivity in SFL be applied to decode the world view author using the OC technique?

The Place of Stylistics in Teaching and Studying Literature

Stylistics is the study of style in written texts. It applies the concepts in linguistics in studying literary texts (Malmkjær, 1991; Chapman, 1973; Brumfit & Carter, 1986). It views style in writing as the author’s exercise of linguistic choices (Leech and Short, 1987). Fowler (1986) stresses that linguistic codes do not reflect reality neutrally, but these codes interpret, organize, and classify the subjects of discourse into world views or ideologies. To Fowler (1996, p.130), “literary texts do speak and participate in society’s communicative practices, and are important in influencing world view and social structure.” Accordingly, readers should take an active role as participants in empathizing with the experiences of the teller or the persona. Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (2005) adds that the reading is a dynamic reflection of reality transposed in words that mirror not only the author’s individual phenomenon in isolation but the full process of life. Hence, readers are free to enjoy and explore a literary work consistent with its organic unity. To achieve consistency with the organic unity of the text, the reader has to establish a degree of objectivity which according to Richards (1960) and (Burton, 1982) is wanting in literary criticism.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Malmkjær (1991, p.141) views language as an “instrument by means of which people can enter into a communicative relations with one another.” It is a social semiotic
which is a system for making meanings. SFL is a potent framework for describing and modeling language as a resource for making meaning and choices. This framework treats language beyond its formal structures and takes the context of culture and the context of situation in language use (Halliday 1985, 1994; Matthiessen, 1995; Martin & Rose, 2003). SFL is identified with the linguists of the London School, specifically Halliday, whose immediate goal in stylistic analysis is “to show why and how the text means what it does” (Halliday 1971; Halliday, 1983, p. x; Martin, 1992; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). To probe what is motivated in the text, to Van Peer (1986, p. 21), it is a fundamental characteristic of human perception.

To show how the text means what it does, this study adopts the approach used by Martin (2002, p. 57; Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 254). Figure 1 illustrates that meaning in texts is determined by (1) context of culture, (2) context of situation, and (3) metafunctions.

![Figure 1. Genre, Register, and Language](image)

**Figure 1. Genre, Register, and Language**

Because language is shaped according to the social and personal needs that it is required to serve (Lyons, 1970, p. 142; Fowler 1996, p. 111), the meanings of the words reflect the stored knowledge of the members of the speech community; and,
language, as a medium, allows the transmission of this stored knowledge among the members of the said community (Berger and Luckmann, 1976).

Context of situation according to Halliday (1994) can be realized by (a) mode, which is the organization of the message; (b) field, the expression of world view; and (c) tenor, the relationship between the interlocutors. While field is experiential, tenor is interpersonal, and mode is textual. Among the three metafunctions, field determines the transitivity pattern (Halliday 1978, p. 64; Malmkjær (1991, p.161).

Metafunctions, to Halliday (1970), are (a) textual, which provides links between language and the features of the situation in which it is used; (b) ideational, serves for the expression of “content” or the speaker’s experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness’, and (c) interpersonal, establishes and maintain social relations. Fowler (1986) adds that the ideational metafunction interprets, organizes, and classifies the subjects of discourse by representing how the world is perceived. Further, the ideational function consists of processes, participants, and circumstances. These three components are specified through choices in the transitivity system, which construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types.

**Transitivity**

Part of the ideational function, which concerns with the transmission of ideas is transitivity. Its function is that of representing processes or experiences like actions, events, processes of consciousness, and relations that covers “all phenomena and anything that can be expressed by a verb: event, whether physical or not, state, or relations” (Halliday, 1985; Halliday, 1976, p. 159). Halliday furthers that the processes expressed through language represent our conception of the world. Transitivity specifies the different types of processes are recognized in the language and the structures by which they are expressed. In this model, the central participant roles are actor and goal, and the interest is on whether or not the process is directed by the actor towards a goal. Transitivity structure can be characterized as agent + process + goal configuration that represents the function of language expressing the speaker’s experience of the external world or his own internal world. Halliday (1971; 1978, p.
explores transitivity in his groundbreaking example of nonstandard usage of language expressing a world view.

**Procedure**

In this article, processes, participants, and circumstances are analyzed to illustrate the mind frame or world view of the persona in an essay written in the SOC technique. It applies the three steps developed by Burton (1982, p. 202) which are (1) isolating the processes, and determining which participant (who or what) is doing each process; (2) determining what sorts of processes they are, and which participant is engaged in which type of process; and (3) verifying who or what is affected or seems to be affected by each of these processes.

As a guide, this paper accounts for the process types by adopting the criteria set by Halliday (1994, p. 173). Table 1 shows and compares the six processes according to category of meaning, the potential number and nature of participants.

Transitivity basically presents how the world is perceived in three dimensions: the material world, the world of consciousness, and the world of relations. It categorizes potential number and the semantic roles assigned to the participants according to the nature of the processes.

**Table 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Processes: Categories and Descriptions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the material world, processes like *build*, *cover*, and *cut* assign the participants as actor (initiator or doer) or goal (recipient or receiver). Processes of this type are material processes (MaPs).

The world of consciousness is identified with processes of sensing, seeing, feeling, or thinking. Processes like *think*, *observe*, and *perceive*, like MaPs require at least two participants, the first being a senser and the second a phenomenon. These processes are identified with thoughts, memory, and cognition. These are known as mental processes (MePs).

The last among the basic processes is the relational processes (RePs), which deal with facts or things, being attributive or identifying. The attributive relation is defined as ‘a is an attribute of x’, while identifying is ‘a is the identity of x’.

The three basic processes are in a cyclical, not linear connection. For example, MaPs and MePs overlap in the case of processes like *breathing*, *coughing*, *smiling*, *dreaming*, and *staring*.

Also, MaPs and RePs overlap in the case of *exist*, *remain*, *arise*, *occur*, *come about*, *happen*, *take place*, *follow*, *ensure*, *sit*, *stand*, *lie*, *hang*, *rise*, *stretch*, *emerge*, *grow*, *erupt*, *flourish*, and *prevail*. The given examples are existential processes (ExPs). Both BePs and ExPs require only one participant.

Lastly, processes like *praise*, *insult*, *abuse*, *slander*, *flatter*, *blame* and *criticize* show the overlap between RePs and MePs. These are known as verbal processes (VePs) that require two participants, the first as the *sayer* and the second as the verbiage.

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**Data Analysis and Discussion**
Old Mrs. Grey is an essay about an illiterate, blind, old woman who suffers a lot and prays to God to end her suffering and let her die. It is a reflection Woolf’s world view, who drowned herself in Ouse River at the age of 59.

Using the stream of consciousness (SOC) technique, Woolf, a modernist writer, provokes and shocks the readers of this poignant essay by deviating from the norms and conventions of writing. To achieve the preconceived effect, she uses wide range of narrative devices like interior monologue, soliloquy, ambiguity, loosely arranged plot, moments of illumination, and private images. In this essay, the author imposes her own perspective upon the readers by getting in and out of the consciousness of Mrs. Grey at will, unraveling to the reader the psychological condition of the pathetic character. To Humphrey (1954, p. 21), using the SOC “is essentially a technical feat.” To appreciate this genre, Humphrey suggests that one should acknowledge the realization of the force of drama that takes place in the minds of human beings.

In using transitivity framework, the illusive features of this SOC essay have been formalized and expressed in percentages. Most of the processes used in this essay are ExPs, MaPs, MePs, and VePs.

Table 2.

*Percentage Distribution of the Processes to the Major and Minor Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Minor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material Existent</td>
<td>12.90</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>19.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Attributive</td>
<td>11.83</td>
<td>23.66</td>
<td>35.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Identity</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>6.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Identity</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>7.53</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Behavior</td>
<td>8.60</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Identity</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the distribution of the six *processes* to the major (human and
animate) and minor participants (nonhuman and inanimate).

The major participants are the doctor, the parish doctor, my daughter, we (Mrs. Grey’s family), he (Dr. Nichols), we (humanity), Mrs. Grey, she (Mrs. Grey), I (Mrs. Grey), me (Mrs. Grey), visitors, God, and husband.

The minor participants are there (moments), color, page, voices, limbs, the busiest, most contented, my heart (Mrs. Grey’s), wild birds, the body, rook, it (week’s washings), it (time), sheets and pyjamas, life, it (Mrs. Grey’s condition), there (fire), smooth uprise, her body (Mrs. Grey’s), damp sheet, the wire, the line, seven foot by four, that (door), there (fire burning), small spot of dusty light, pain, the morning, the birds, her eyes (Mrs. Grey’s), they (Mrs. Grey’s eyes), and it (reason).

The analysis of this essay shows that it primarily uses ExPs (35.49%) processes because this work deals with the very agonizing existence of Mrs. Grey. Examples of which are come, went, sat, was running, go, don’t go, pass, came, was gone, went out, is lit up, flying, shall cling, lives, were, crumble, dissolve, seems, is, was, continue, is folded, stopped, jerked, stood, was, trying to escape, wriggling, wriggled, and settled.

MaPs (19.36%) constitute processes like can’t afford, put out, pinion, used, flung, was jerked, was thrown, crawl, crawls, let, let fall, hold, was jerked, twisted, and jerked.

MePs (15.08%) include processes like wonders, was looking, change the focus, saw, could not see, hear, wish, was wrapped, could be seen, had ceased to focus, could see, and lost.

VePs (15.05%) comprise says, insist, mumbled, pray, can’t read, can’t write, say, prays, have argued, have sung, have talked, and do not state.

RePs-Identity (8.60%) don’t seem, are, is, may be, was, looked, may be, were and RePs-Attributive (6.45%) is, am, were, and spread.

The analysis shows that there are no BePs in the essay.
Summary and Conclusion
Analysis of data shows that the text yields 41 Participants: 10 major and 31 minor. These participants are distributed as 18 actors/goals, 33 existents, 6 carriers of certain attributes, 8 identified possessors of characteristics, 14 sayers or verbiages, 14 sensers/phenomena, and no behavers at all. Specifically, the main participant, Mrs. Grey, is portrayed in different roles: actor or goal (8), existent (6), carrier of attributes (3), identified possessor of characteristics (1), and sayer (7).

Using the passive transformation, the persona has made Mrs. Grey debilitated with the use of used, flung, was jerked, was thrown, and crawl. As an existent, her sense of being is explored with sat, was running, go, don’t go, and pass. As a carrier/identifier, she is assigned with am and don’t seem. Through interior monologue, she, as a sayer, is made to pray, can’t read, can’t write, and say. And as a senser, she is paired with was looking, change the focus, saw, could not see, hear, and wish.

Using transitivity as a framework can help the reader to unlock and probe what flows directly through mind of the persona. By using this framework, the sensations and thought impressions of Mrs. Grey become the reader’s, making the bond between linguistic choices and enjoyment of the literary less impressionistic, reinforced, and more appreciated.

As a stylistic analysis of a prose, this paper has demonstrated how literature teaching can be linguistically informed by applying the systems of categorization in vocabulary, syntax, and semantics.

References


