

Original Paper

An Analysis of Narrative Texts in Senior High School English Textbooks from the Perspective of the Transitivity System

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the distribution of transitivity processes in narrative texts of PEP senior high school English textbooks, their interaction with the “form-function-theme” three-dimensional model, and effective teaching strategy transformation. Using narrative texts as the corpus, it conducts transitivity annotation and statistical analysis. Results show material processes dominate, mental processes facilitate character portrayal, and relational processes define cultural concepts, with different processes playing distinct roles in disaster, growth and culture-themed texts. The study verifies the applicability of Halliday’s transitivity theory, establishes a systematic analytical framework, and proposes operable teaching strategies. It also notes the limited sample size, suggesting future research expand the corpus and integrate other linguistic theories for more comprehensive teaching tools.

Keywords

narrative texts, senior high school English textbooks, transitivity system

1. Introduction

The transitivity system theory within the framework of systemic functional linguistics provides an important theoretical perspective for analyzing narrative texts in senior high school English textbooks. In recent years, with the in-depth development of English teaching research, scholars have gradually paid attention to the unique value of transitivity analysis in textbook text interpretation and teaching practice. Existing studies have shown that by analyzing the distribution and functions of different types of processes in narrative texts, we can deeply understand the language selection strategies of textbook compilers, and further reveal the characteristics of texts in terms of narrative structure, character portrayal, and theme expression. Luo Chanjuan’s (2022) research on junior high school English narrative texts found that material processes dominate in promoting plot development, while mental processes and relational processes play key roles in depicting characters’ inner worlds and

environmental descriptions. This finding provides an important reference for textbook analysis at the senior high school level. However, the improvement of senior high school narrative texts in language complexity, cultural connotation, and thinking level makes their transitivity characteristics present a more diverse pattern.

At the level of teaching methods, significant progress has been made in the applied research of the transitivity system. Macken-Horarik's (2006) research revealed the differences in students' sensitivity to transitivity structures when understanding narrative texts, which provides important enlightenment for differentiated teaching. Ling Xuqun (2019) further proposed that teachers can design annotation and analysis tasks based on process types to guide students to deeply understand the linguistic characteristics and narrative strategies of texts. Empirical research by Zein et al. (2019) showed that integrating transitivity analysis into writing teaching can significantly improve students' narrative ability, especially in the selection and collocation of process types. These studies collectively point to a conclusion: transitivity analysis is not only a text interpretation tool but also an important bridge connecting language form teaching and meaning construction.

Despite the remarkable progress made in existing research, systematic transitivity analysis targeting senior high school English textbooks is still insufficient. Most studies focus on texts at the junior high school or university level, lacking special discussions on the senior high school stage, a critical period. In addition, the combination of theoretical discussions and teaching practice in existing research is still lacking, especially in the need for more empirical research support on how to effectively transform transitivity analysis into classroom teaching strategies. Although the studies by Macken-Horarik and Ling Xuqun explored the application value of transitivity analysis in teaching, they failed to systematically establish a three-dimensional teaching model of "form-function-theme".

2. The Transitivity System

The transitivity theory, proposed by M. A. K. Halliday (1994), is an important tool for analyzing the experiential meaning of discourse in systemic functional linguistics. The transitivity system divides the experiential meaning expressed by clauses into six types of processes, namely material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, existential process, and verbal process. Among them, material processes are about the process of "doing" something; mental processes are about the process of "sensing" something; relational processes are about the process of "defining" something, including identifying relational processes and attributive relational processes; behavioral processes are about human physiological and psychological behaviors; verbal processes are about the process of "saying" something; existential processes are about the process of something "existing or happening". Material processes emphasize the occurrence of actions and the agents of actions; mental processes express various psychological activities, often involving sensors and phenomena; relational processes describe the state of things; behavioral processes express various physiological activities of people, usually with only one participant, which is often a person; existential processes express the existence of things,

where the participant is the existent; verbal processes refer to the process of people exchanging information through language (2014).

These six types of processes correspond to different semantic and grammatical structures respectively. By analyzing the process types of each clause in the discourse, we can reveal the experiences of the real world reflected in the discourse and the organization and expression of these experiences by the author, thereby deeply understanding the meaning and function of the discourse. The analysis of narrative texts from the perspective of the transitivity system provides a systematic linguistic tool for in-depth interpretation of the narrative structure, character portrayal, and theme expression of narrative texts, enabling researchers to objectively reveal how authors construct the narrative world through different types of processes. In terms of teaching practice, transitivity analysis can help teachers more accurately grasp the linguistic characteristics of textbook texts, design targeted teaching activities, guide students to pay attention to the connection between language forms and narrative functions, and thus improve their text interpretation ability and writing level. This analytical method not only strengthens students' language awareness but also cultivates their critical thinking, transforming language learning from mere form drills to in-depth meaning construction, and providing an effective path for the cultivation of key competencies in the English subject.

3. Research Questions

Based on the transitivity system theory of systemic functional linguistics, this study aims to explore the following core questions:

- (1) What are the distribution laws of various transitivity processes in narrative texts of senior high school English textbooks?
- (2) What is the interactive relationship between different transitivity processes and the three-dimensional model of "form-function-theme" in narrative texts?
- (3) What are the effective forms of transforming transitivity analysis into teaching strategies?

4. Transitivity Analysis of the Corpus

This paper adopts the double-difference model as the main effect model, and takes the 2018 R&D expense deduction policy as an exogenous shock. The details are as follows:

4.1 Overall Statistical Analysis

The corpus of this study is selected from all narrative texts in the full set of PEP senior high school English textbooks, totaling 6 texts with 2155 words. The corpus involves diverse themes such as growth, disasters, and culture. After transitivity annotation of all corpus, a total of 289 transitivity processes were obtained. The frequency and proportion of each type of process are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

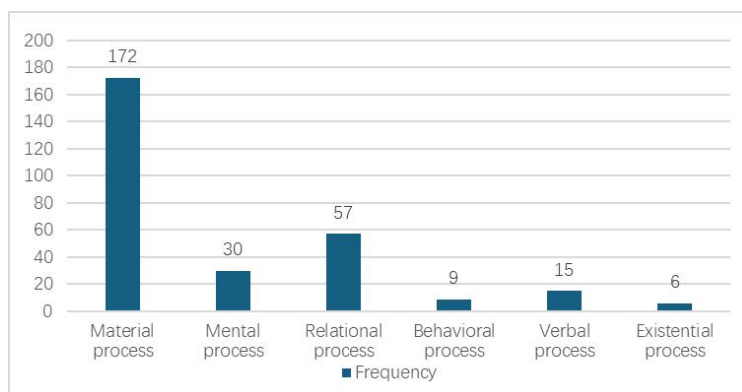


Figure 1. Frequency of Process Types in Narrative Samples

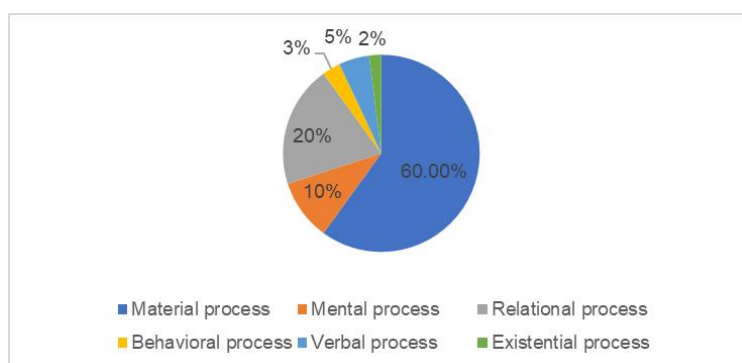


Figure 2. Proportion of Process Types in Narrative Samples

As shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the narrative texts in senior high school English textbooks cover all process types. Among these processes, material processes have the highest frequency of use (172 times, 60%); relational processes are the second (57 times, 20%); mental processes appear 30 times (10%). Behavioral, verbal, and existential processes appear less frequently, accounting for 3%, 5%, and 2% respectively.

Material processes dominate, especially in disaster-themed texts (such as “The Night the Earth Didn’t Sleep”) reaching 70%, strengthening the scene dynamics through intensive action descriptions (such as “shake” “cut across”); mental processes are concentrated in growth-themed texts (such as “The Freshman Challenge”) to depict characters’ contradictory psychology (such as “feel nervous but curious”); relational processes appear frequently in culture-themed texts (such as “My Amazing Naadam Experience”) and assume the function of defining cultural concepts (such as “Naadam means ‘games’”).

4.2 Interactive Relationship between Transitivity Processes and Narrative Forms

4.2.1 Material Processes and Plot Advancement

Halliday (2014) pointed out in “An Introduction to Functional Grammar” that material processes construct the temporal logic of event development through chains of action, and are the core carrier of

narrative dynamics.

Example: A huge crack cut across houses, roads, and waterways. (*The Night the Earth Didn't Sleep*)

In disaster-themed texts, the example concretizes abstract disasters into perceptible destructive behaviors through the high dynamic transitive verb “cut” (Painter, 2020). This language choice conforms to the core characteristic of “narrativity” as described by Labov (1972), reproducing event processes through intensive action sequences.

4.2.2 Mental Processes and Character Portrayal

Toolan (2001) emphasized that mental processes are “linguistic windows for presenting consciousness”, showing characters’ inner worlds through three types of verbs: perception, affection, and cognition. Research in cognitive narratology by Simpson (2014) shows that when mental processes account for more than 25% in first-person narratives, the text will present significant “interiority” characteristics.

Example: I feel nervous but also curious. (*My 100-Day Diary of the COVID-19 Pandemic*)

Through the juxtaposition of contradictory adjectives, the example verifies the “emotional complexity” theory proposed by Oatley (2016) that mental processes can simulate the multi-dimensional psychological states of real human decision-making. This is consistent with Bamberg’s (2012) “identity construction narrative” model, that is, character psychological descriptions are linguistic representations of the development of self-cognition.

4.2.3 Relational Processes and Environmental Description

Example: The air is thin and the mountains disappear into clouds. (*A Day in the Clouds*)

Thompson (Thompson, 2014) pointed out that relational processes construct the static framework of scenes through attribute assignment (such as “is thin”) and spatial positioning (such as “disappear into clouds”). The visual grammar theory by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) holds that relational processes play a role similar to “composition” in language, establishing the spatial legibility of texts through prepositions and attribute networks.

Table 1. Interactive Relationship between Transitivity Processes and Narrative Forms

Narrative form	Dominant process	Language strategy	Effect
Plot advancement	Material process	Short sentence	Enhance a sense of urgency and visualization
		clusters, high-transitivity verbs	
Character portrayal	Mental process	Emotional adjectives, metaphorical expressions	Deepen characters’ inner contradictions

Environmental description	Relational process	Attribute	
		assignment, spatial prepositions	Establish a static framework of scenes

4.3 Interactive Relationship between Transitivity Processes and Narrative Functions

4.3.1 Disaster Response Function

Example: Workers built shelters for survivors. (*The Night the Earth Didn't Sleep*)

The genre theory by Martin & Rose (2007) holds that disaster narratives usually follow a three-stage structure of “destruction-response-recovery”, where the high-frequency use of material processes (such as “build shelters” in the example) is the linguistic means to realize this genre structure. The material process “built” takes a collective noun (workers) as the agent, emphasizing collaborative narratives and serving the theme of “united reconstruction”.

4.3.2 Cultural Transmission Function

The cultural transmission function is one of the important narrative functions of narrative texts, mainly realized through relational processes. Relational processes define and classify cultural phenomena through attribute assignment and identifying structures.

Example: Mongolian wrestling is different from Olympic wrestling. (*My Amazing Naadam Experience*)

The visual grammar theory by Kress & van Leeuwen points out that relational processes play a role similar to “classification” in language, establishing semantic networks of cultural concepts through attribute assignment (such as “is different from” in the example) and identifying structures (such as “X means Y”).

4.3.3 Growth Reflection Function

The growth reflection function is an important part of the narrative function of narrative texts, mainly realized through mental processes. Mental processes show characters' inner changes through three types of verbs: cognition, affection, and perception, forming the cognitive development trajectory of “experience-reflection-transformation” in growth narratives.

Example: I realized the Internet could remove distance between people. (*Stronger Together: How We Have Been Changed by the Internet*)

Bamberg pointed out in “Narrative Practice and Identity Navigation” that growth narratives are essentially linguistic processes of “self-cognition reconstruction”. Mental processes (such as “realized”, “believed”) mark cognitive turning points. For example, in the example, the cognitive verb “realized” marks the reconstruction of the protagonist's world outlook.

Table 2. Interactive Relationship between Transitivity Processes and Narrative Functions

Narrative function	Process type	Typical case	Theme connection
Disaster response	Material process	“dig out” “build shelters”	Human resistance and community awareness
Cultural transmission	Relational process	“X means Y” “is different”	Cultural comparison and identity recognition
Growth reflection	Mental process	“realized” “hoped”	Individual cognitive development and socialization

4.4 Interactive Relationship between Transitivity Processes and Theme Expression

4.4.1 Disaster Themes: Dynamic Narration of Material Processes

Disaster-themed texts are usually dominated by material processes, constructing a narrative arc of “destruction-rescue-reconstruction” through high-density action chains. For example, in “The Night the Earth Didn’t Sleep”, the continuous use of verbs not only reproduces the suddenness and destructiveness of disasters but also strengthens the dynamics of the narrative through the temporality of actions. Painter emphasized that material processes can transform abstract disasters into perceptible visual images through concrete action descriptions, thereby enhancing readers’ sense of immersion.

4.4.2 Ecological Protection Themes: Relational Processes and Value Establishment

Texts with ecological protection themes tend to construct a static value framework through relational processes, supplemented by material processes to strengthen calls for action. For example, in “A Day in the Clouds”, relational processes (such as “the land is sacred”) establish the ethical basis for ecological protection through attribute assignment, while material processes (such as “watch antelopes”) call on readers to participate in protection actions through specific behaviors.

4.4.3 Science and Technology Humanistic Themes: Mental Processes and Emotional Changes

Texts with science and technology humanistic themes usually rely on mental processes to show characters’ emotional changes and cognitive development. For example, in “Stronger Together: How We Have Been Changed by the Internet”, mental processes account for 38%, and the use of verbs such as “felt less lonely” and “realized” vividly depicts characters’ inner worlds under the influence of science and technology.

5. Educational implications and suggestions

5.1 Form-function Linkage Teaching

Based on the interactive relationship between transitivity processes and narrative forms and functions, teachers can design step-by-step teaching activities of “process type annotation - narrative function analysis - theme discussion”. Taking the disaster-themed text “The Night the Earth Didn’t Sleep” as an

example, first guide students to annotate the material process verbs in the text and analyze how these action chains construct the dynamics of disaster scenes; then guide students to explore how the high-frequency use of material processes realizes the narrative function of “destruction-rescue-reconstruction”; finally, elevate to the theme discussion of “human spirit of resistance”, combining language analysis with humanistic thinking.

5.2 Process Transformation Rewriting Training

Realize text reconstruction by changing the dominant process type: rewrite environmental descriptions dominated by relational processes (such as “The valley was quiet”) into those dominated by material processes (such as “Fog enveloped the silent valley”), and let students compare the differences in narrative effects before and after rewriting. Such training aims to practice Halliday’s theoretical proposition that “process selection creates different experiential worlds”.

5.3 Stage-based Teaching Model

A spiral three-stage model can be adopted in senior high school English classrooms: in the first year of senior high school, help students identify basic process types through annotation activities and games; in the second year of senior high school, guide students to allocate process combinations according to different themes and experience the differences in narrative effects through rewriting exercises; in the third year of senior high school, cultivate students' critical application ability of process types through creative writing and author style analysis.

6. Conclusion

This study systematically analyzed the narrative texts in PEP senior high school English textbooks based on the transitivity system theory of systemic functional linguistics, revealing the interactive relationship between different types of transitivity processes in three dimensions: narrative form, function, and theme expression. The study found that material processes construct dynamic narratives through action chains in disaster-themed texts, mental processes show characters' inner changes in growth-themed texts, and relational processes assume the function of concept definition in culture-themed texts. These findings verify the applicability of Halliday’s transitivity theory in the analysis of senior high school English textbooks and provide a new perspective for narrative teaching. Compared with existing studies, this study establishes a systematic “form-function-theme” three-dimensional framework and proposes operable teaching strategies, making up for the deficiency of insufficient combination of theory and practice in previous studies. However, this study only selects 6 narrative texts from PEP textbooks as the corpus, and the sample size is relatively limited. Future research can expand the corpus scope, include textbooks of different versions and grades, and further explore the application of transitivity analysis in cross-version and cross-grade textbook comparison. In addition, combining transitivity analysis with other linguistic theories (such as cognitive linguistics) to develop more comprehensive teaching tools and evaluation systems will be an important direction for future research.

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