

An Analysis of Junior High School English Textbooks from the Perspective of Transitivity System: A Case Study of FLTRP Narrative Personal Texts

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Abstract—This study adopts the transitivity system within Systemic Functional Linguistics as the theoretical framework to analyze narrative personal texts in the new FLTRP junior high school English textbooks (Grades 7–8). Using a mixed-methods approach, the research focuses on the text “Impossible, I’m possible featuring athlete Su Bingtian”. The findings indicate that: (1) material, relational, and mental processes dominate, while verbal, behavioral, and existential processes are less frequent; (2) material processes construct Su’s image as a striver, relational processes define his identity and achievements, and mental/verbal processes reveal his inner world and enhance interactivity, collectively building an “actor-thinker-role model” identity; (3) the coordination of transitivity processes effectively conveys values such as perseverance and courage. This study provides a functional linguistic perspective for textbook discourse analysis and offers implications for text interpretation and value-based teaching.

Keywords—transitivity, junior high school English, narrative personal texts, textbook analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

The Compulsory Education’s English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) of China advocates for the cultivation of students’ core competencies in four key areas: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability [1]. Language ability here refers to students’ awareness and ability to use and adjust English learning strategies actively, and expand English learning channels to increase the efficiency of English learning. And textbooks are widely regarded as a crucial vehicle for fostering these core competencies. Consequently, teachers are encouraged to engage in thorough textbook analysis, using these materials integratively and creatively to uncover the valuable learning content inherent in each text.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday [2], is grounded in the perspective of language

as a social semiotic system, emphasizing its functional nature and use within socio-cultural contexts. This theoretical framework not only provides a robust tool for language analysis but has also demonstrated considerable utility in the field of textbook discourse analysis. Transitivity, a central component of the ideational metafunction in SFL, operates by analyzing process types, participants, and circumstantial elements within clauses. This analysis can reveal deeper-level ideologies, value orientations, and authorial stances embedded within discourse. Applying this theoretical tool to English textbook analysis may assist researchers in looking beyond superficial linguistic forms, facilitating a more nuanced interpretation of how discourse constructs character images and conveys cultural meanings and values through specific linguistic choices.

A review of existing literature indicates that research on English textbooks from an SFL perspective has often focused on theoretical and methodological approaches such as ecolinguistics and the transitivity system. Research objects have frequently consisted of entire textbook series or individual lessons from primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, with a common aim being to uncover underlying values within discourse. However, it appears that relatively less research has been dedicated specifically to applying transitivity analysis to narrative personal texts found in junior high school English textbooks.

This study, therefore, focuses on the narrative personal texts contained within three new FLTRP junior high school English textbooks (Grade 7, Volumes 1 & 2, and Grade 8, Volume 1). This genre is primarily concerned with narrating personal experiences, shaping character images, and conveying certain qualities or values. Its forms can be diverse, ranging from brief character introductions to more detailed biographical reports with news-like features. The text “Impossible, I’m possible” from Unit 1 (Reading for writing section) of the FLTRP Grade 8, Volume 1 textbook, which serves as the focal point for this study, is one such example. It is a narrative personal text based on the news event of Su Bingtian

breaking his own limits and making history, thus combining informational and narrative characteristics.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Foundation: The Transitivity System

According to Halliday [2], language is structured to fulfill three primary metafunctions: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual (as in [3]). The ideational metafunction concerns how language expresses human experience and logical relations. The interpersonal metafunction involves how language facilitates communication, expresses role relationships, and negotiates social positions among interactants. The textual metafunction pertains to how language organizes information internally and creates coherence within a given context.

The ideational metafunction utilizes language to represent experiences of both the inner and outer worlds, addressing questions such as “What happened? Who did what to whom? When and where?” Within this metafunction, the experiential and logical components are considered essential. The experiential function refers specifically to how clauses represent different types of experience. A clause can function both as a mode of action (e.g., giving or demanding goods, services, information) and as a mode of reflection (imposing order on experience). The grammatical system understood to realize this function is transitivity.

Halliday suggests that the experiences we seek to represent through language can be categorized into a set of six process types. These processes are not conceived as occurring in isolation; they inherently involve entities (participants), as well as circumstances of time, space, and manner [4]. This network of relationships constitutes the transitivity system.

The transitivity system thus provides a framework for interpreting the world of experience through a set of manageable process types. The six primary types are: material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process, and existential process.

1) Material process

Expresses processes of doing or happening, typically realized by action verbs. It usually involves an Actor and a Goal, realized by nominal groups.

Example: The teacher (Actor) opened (Material Process) the book (Goal).

2) Mental process

Expresses processes of sensing, encompassing perception (seeing, hearing), affection (liking, fearing), and cognition (thinking, knowing).

Examples:

- (1) He (Senser) saw (Mental Process: perception) the North Star (Phenomenon).
- (2) She (Senser) likes (Mental Process: affection) the gift (Phenomenon).
- (3) I (Senser) know (Mental Process: cognition) they don't care (Phenomenon).

3) Relational process

Expresses processes of being and having, establishing relationships between entities. It is commonly divided into attributive (x is an attribute of a) and identifying (x is the identity of a) modes. Each can be further classified as intensive, circumstantial, or possessive.

Examples:

- (1) She (Carrier) is (Relational Process) clever (Attribute, intensive).
- (2) The film (Carrier) lasted (Relational Process) two hours (Attribute, circumstantial).
- (3) He (Carrier) has (Relational Process) a Toyota (Attribute, possessive).
- (4) My name (Identified) is (Relational Process) Alice (Identifier, intensive).
- (5) This (Identified) is (Relational Process) the place where I met him (Identifier, circumstantial).
- (6) The piano (Identified) is (Relational Process) mine (Identifier, possessive).

4) Behavioral process

Expresses (typically conscious) physiological and psychological behaviors, such as laughing, crying, dreaming, breathing, sighing.

Example: She (Behaver) laughed (Behavioral Process) heartily (Circumstance).

5) Verbal process

Expresses processes of saying, communicating information through speech. Key participants may include Sayer, Receiver, and Verbiage.

Example: The guide (Sayer) told (Verbal Process) the tourists (Receiver) a story (Verbiage).

6) Existential process

Expresses simply that something exists or happens.

Example: There is (Existential Process) a cup (Existent) on the table (Circumstance).

As a primary resource for representing experiential meaning in clauses, the selection among these process types within the transitivity system is considered to reflect choices that can imply value orientations [5]. Similarly, choices regarding participants and the portrayal of their actions are viewed as potentially revealing authorial stance and intention.

Therefore, employing the transitivity system to analyze clauses within narrative personal texts in junior high school English textbooks may allow for an understanding not only of how the text presents the figure and their deeds but also of the linguistic mechanisms used to convey perspective. This approach could aid in elucidating the educational ideas and values potentially embedded in such texts for adolescent learners, and in exploring how different transitivity processes might interact to collectively realize the text's perceived educational and communicative aims.

B. Review of Empirical Research

A survey of literature concerning the application of SFL's transitivity system to English textbook analysis reveals relevant work by both domestic and international scholars.

Darong and Regus [6] applied SFL to analyze two sets of EFL textbooks published in Indonesia in 2013, examining linguistic features across the three metafunctions with a focus on transitivity processes, mood, and nominal group structure. Their findings indicated a high frequency of material processes, suggesting an emphasis on describing concrete actions in those textbooks. Emilia *et al.*'s [7] drawing on transitivity theory and a framework for analyzing gender in textbooks, explored gender representations. Their study pointed to asymmetrical portrayals of gender roles in the materials examined.

In the Chinese context, Xu [8] conducted an analysis of 169 ecology-related texts from eight government-stipulated junior high school English textbook series. Using transitivity theory and a mixed-methods approach, her study aimed to reveal the transitivity features and implied ecological perspectives within that discourse. Wu [9] performed a transitivity analysis on a specific text "A Night the Earth Didn't Sleep" from a PEP senior high school textbook, noting the presence of material, mental, relational, and behavioral processes, while verbal and existential processes were absent, possibly due to textual genre. Gao and Chen [10], and Wu [11], separately conducted ecological discourse analyses on textbook texts related to the Man and Nature theme, combining transitivity analysis with an ecological philosophy. Their studies explored the distribution of process types and sought to uncover underlying ecological orientations. Peng and Yu [12] utilized transitivity to analyze biographical texts across the new PEP senior high school textbook series, combining quantitative overview with qualitative case study. Guo [13] and Jia [14], from an ecolinguistic perspective, performed ecological discourse analyses on texts from university-level English textbooks, aiming to reveal how ecological meaning is constructed and to discuss implications for fostering ecological awareness among language students.

In summary, existing research has often utilized transitivity theory to analyze ideological and value-laden aspects of English textbooks from perspectives such as ecology and gender. The research objects have predominantly been senior high school and university-level materials, with data frequently drawn from ecological texts. These studies collectively demonstrate the potential explanatory power of the transitivity system for probing deeper meanings in textbook discourse. However, it appears that fine-grained analysis focusing specifically on narrative personal texts within the new FLTRP junior high school textbooks remains relatively limited. Such texts, often concise, narratively focused, and explicit in value communication, present distinct analytical value. Therefore, this study focuses on narrative personal texts in the FLTRP junior high school English textbooks. Through a mixed-methods approach, it attempts a detailed analysis of process types and discursive functions, with the aim of exploring the linguistic mechanisms involved in character construction and value transmission, and to

tentatively offer suggestions for textbook use and teaching practice.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following three research questions:

- (1) What patterns can be observed in the distribution of transitivity process types within the Su Bingtian narrative personal text in the FLTRP junior high school English textbooks?
- (2) How might the specific selections of transitivity processes within the text function to collectively shape the character image and convey particular values?
- (3) In what ways do the different transitivity processes appear to interact and collaborate to contribute to the text's broader educational and communicative purposes?

B. Research Subjects

The data for this study consists of all identified narrative personal texts from the specified FLTRP junior high school English textbooks (Grade 7, Volumes 1 & 2, and Grade 8, Volume 1). A total of 5 texts were collected, titled: "Last but not least, The Steel Roses of China, Exploring the unexplored, Impossible, I'm possible, and Iron girl", comprising 1,087 words in total. This paper focuses its analysis on the text "Impossible, I'm possible". This text was selected for closer examination due to its representative nature as a narrative personal text, its clear thematic focus, and its explicit value orientation. It narrates the real event of Su Bingtian pushing his limits to make athletic history, presenting a narrative arc from challenge to achievement. Thematically, it emphasizes breaking through limits and perseverance, highlighting a spirit of dedication through specific details. In terms of value communication, the text utilizes direct speech and authorial commentary to explicitly advocate for values such as courage and persistence, suggesting its potential for educational engagement.

C. Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. Initially, the UAM CorpusTool 3.3 software was used to perform transitivity analysis on the collected corpus. Each clause was annotated for its process type, participant roles, and circumstantial elements, with the primary analytical focus being the identification of the process type. Subsequently, the frequency and proportional distribution of each process type across all texts were calculated to allow for a macro-level quantitative overview. Following this, the text "Impossible, I'm possible" was taken as a case study for deeper qualitative analysis. The analysis was structured around three thematic sections derived from the text's content: "Dilemma and choice, action and achievement, and role model and inspiration". For each section, a frequency

table of process types is presented. Subsequently, a total of 9 typical clauses were selected from across these sections based on the criteria of close relevance to the figure, representation of varied process types, and inclusion of different clause structures. These clauses were subjected to further qualitative analysis concerning their process types. This two-tiered approach aims to explore distribution patterns within the text sections and to facilitate a more interpretive discussion of how such texts may construct meaning, ultimately considering how transitivity processes might work together to realize the text's perceived functions.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Overall Distribution of Transitivity Processes

The transitivity annotation of the 5 narrative personal texts yielded a total of 134 process instances. Figs. 1 and 2 present the frequency and percentage distribution, respectively.

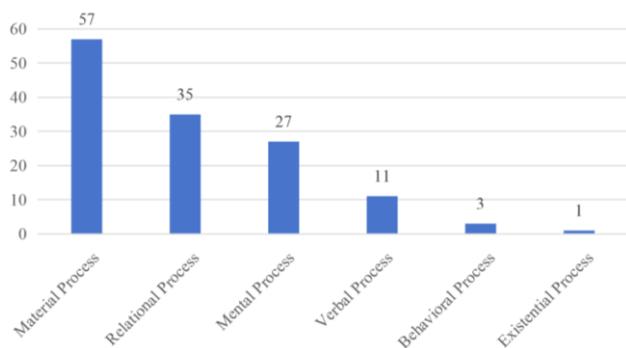


Fig. 1. Frequency table of process types in the narrative personal text sample.

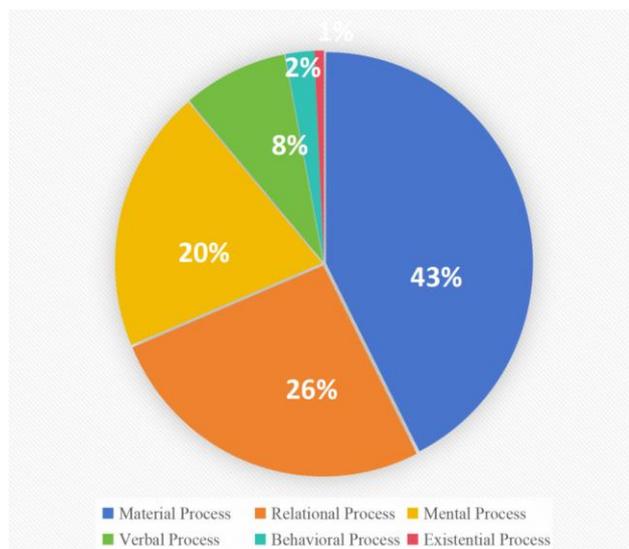


Fig. 2. Percentage distribution of process types in the narrative personal text sample.

As indicated by the charts, all six process types are present. The material process is the most frequent (57 instances, approximately 43% of the total), followed by the relational process (35 instances, 26%) and the mental process (27 instances, 20%). The verbal (11 instances,

8%), behavioral (3 instances, 2%), and existential (1 instance, 1%) processes occur with markedly lower frequency. In summary, material, relational, and mental processes collectively account for 89% of all processes identified in this corpus, constituting the dominant types within these narrative personal texts.

The material process, expressing doing and typically involving an Actor and Goal, appears to be heavily utilized for narrating the figure's specific actions, struggles, and accomplishments (e.g., training, competing, achieving records). This likely serves to shape an image of agency and perseverance, enhancing narrative dynamism. Relational processes, which establish attributes and identities, seem to function in defining the figure's qualities, status, or the significance of events, thereby contributing to value positioning. Mental processes, revealing internal states like belief or determination, may add psychological depth, making the character more relatable. Behavioral processes, reflecting observable actions like smiling or sighing, often accompany emotional expression. Verbal processes, introducing direct or reported speech, can enhance authenticity and dialogic engagement. Existential processes, while rare, may serve to foreground particular entities or states. Overall, the predominance of material, relational, and mental processes suggests that these texts may rely on a combination of action narration, attribute assignment, and psychological portrayal to construct character images and convey values.

B. Qualitative Analysis and Discussion of Transitivity Processes

To explore the discursive realization in greater depth, this section presents a qualitative analysis of selected clauses from the "Impossible, I'm possible" text, organized around three narrative phases. The selection of typical clauses was guided by the following three criteria: firstly, the clause content must be directly pertinent to the figure in question; secondly, the chosen clauses should, as far as possible, represent a diverse range of transitivity process types; thirdly, the selection aimed to include a variety of clause structures, namely independent, coordinated, and embedded clauses. Based on these criteria, a total of nine typical clauses were ultimately selected from the text for subsequent transitivity analysis, the details of which are presented below.

1) Dilemma and choice

As Table I shows, material and relational processes are the most frequently employed in this phase. Three illustrative clauses are analyzed below.

TABLE I. FREQUENCY OF PROCESS TYPES IN THE "DILEMMA AND CHOICE" PHASE

| Process Type | Material | Relational | Mental | Verbal | Total |
|--------------|----------|------------|--------|--------|-------|
| Frequency | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 10 |
| Percentage | 40% | 30% | 20% | 10% | 100% |

① Su (Actor) changed (Material Process) his starting leg (Goal).

Sentence ① is a material process clause which presents a concrete, proactive action, potentially highlighting Su’s agency and decisiveness when confronted with a technical challenge.

② This (Carrier) was (Relational Process: attributive) a very risky decision (Attribute).

Sentence ② is a attributive relational clause which characterizes the nature of the decision itself. The attribute “very risky” may imply the significant stakes and pressure involved, framing the context of his choice.

③ People (Senser) doubted (Mental Process: cognition) his decision (Phenomenon).

Sentence ③ is a mental process clause which introduces an external perspective of skepticism. This could serve to set off by contrast the conviction required for Su to proceed, indirectly underscoring his courage.

In this phase, the prevalence of material processes seems to emphasize active response. Relational processes define the situation, while the inclusion of a mental process introduces external perception. Together, these choices may contribute to constructing an image of a “decision-maker” acting with resolve amidst doubt, thereby potentially conveying values related to courage and independent judgment.

2) Action and achievement

This phase is characterized by a strong emphasis on material processes, as shown in Table II.

TABLE II. FREQUENCY OF PROCESS TYPES IN THE “ACTION AND ACHIEVEMENT” PHASE

| Process Type | Material | Relational | Total |
|--------------|----------|------------|-------|
| Frequency | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| Percentage | 75% | 25% | 100% |

④ Su (Actor) trained (Material Process) hard.

Sentence ④ is a simple material process clause which succinctly depicts the sustained effort, foregrounding the quality of perseverance central to the narrative.

⑤ He (Actor) clocked (Material Process) 9.99 seconds (Goal).

Sentence ⑤ is another material process, and this clause uses a specific, measurable achievement (9.99 seconds) to objectify success, potentially enhancing the factual persuasiveness of the account.

⑥ He (Identified) became (Relational Process) the first Chinese athlete (Identifier) to run in the Olympic 100 m final.

Sentence ⑥ is a identifying relational process clause which assigns a historically significant identity to Su, framing his personal achievement within a broader national and international context, thereby amplifying its perceived importance.

The near-exclusive use of material processes in this phase appears to construct a narrative driven by concrete action and tangible results, shaping an image of an actor and achiever. The relational process then serves to interpret and elevate the significance of those actions, possibly reinforcing a value narrative where dedicated effort leads to meaningful reward.

3) Role model and inspiration

In this concluding phase, verbal and relational processes become more prominent (Table III).

TABLE III. FREQUENCY OF PROCESS TYPES IN THE “ROLE MODEL AND INSPIRATION” PHASE

| Process Type | Verbal | Relational | Mental | Material | Total |
|--------------|--------|------------|--------|----------|-------|
| Frequency | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| Percentage | 33% | 33% | 17% | 17% | 100% |

⑦ Su Bingtian (Sayer) has told (Verbal Process) youngsters (Receiver), “Never let your age hold you back” (Verbiage).

Sentence ⑦ is a verbal process with direct quotation (Verbiage) which allows the figure to speak directly to the reader, potentially enhancing authenticity, immediacy, and the inspirational tone.

⑧ I (Senser) believe (Mental Process: cognition) you can write your own story (Phenomenon).

Sentence ⑧ is a cognitive mental process clause which expresses the figure’s own belief and extends an expectation to the reader. This may function to create a sense of shared possibility and interactive encouragement.

⑨ Nothing (Carrier) is (Relational Process: attributive) impossible (Attribute) as long as you try and stick to it.

Sentence ⑨ is an attributive relational clause which presents a generalized, proverbial statement. It serves to abstract and explicitly verbalize the core moral of the narrative, transitioning from specific biography to universal advice.

This final phase seems to shift towards more direct engagement and explicit value articulation. Verbal processes facilitate a mentor-like dialogue, mental processes express conviction, and relational processes formulate the overarching lesson. These choices may collectively work to solidify Su’s image as an inspirer or role model, making the intended values of belief, perseverance, and daring to try explicit for the student reader.

V. CONCLUSION

A. Research Findings

Based on the analysis, the following observations can be tentatively made: First, within the examined corpus of junior high school narrative personal texts, the distribution of transitivity processes shows a pattern where material processes are most frequent, followed by relational and mental processes, with other types being less common. This pattern seems to correspond to the genre’s apparent emphasis on recounting action, while also incorporating definition and psychological insight. Second, within the focal text, the strategic use of material processes appears to foreground the figure’s endeavors and successes; relational processes seem to frame his attributes and the value of his achievements; mental and verbal processes offer glimpses into his perspective and facilitate engagement. These discursive choices collectively seem to contribute to the construction of a

multifaceted Su Bingtian, integrating aspects of actor, thinker, and role model, through which values like dedication and self-belief are promoted. Finally, the three main process types appear to assume complementary roles across the narrative's structure: material processes establishing the factual sequence, relational processes providing evaluation and significance, and mental or verbal processes fostering connection and explicit messaging. Their interaction seems central to how the text may achieve its educational and communicative objectives.

B. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study may offer some implications for teaching practice. First, it underscores the potential of textbook texts to serve as sites not only for language learning but also for implicit value exploration. In teaching narrative personal texts, teachers might consider guiding students to look beyond surface-level grammar and vocabulary. For instance, drawing attention to prevalent material processes could lead students to discuss the figure's actions and the implied values of effort or perseverance. Analyzing relational processes might help students discern how qualities and achievements are framed. Engaging with mental and verbal processes could facilitate discussions on perspective and the text's attempt to connect with the reader. Second, instructional tasks could be designed around transitivity analysis, such as identifying process types, discussing participant roles, or reflecting on how language choices relate to character portrayal. Such activities might help cultivate students' metalinguistic awareness, discourse analysis skills, and critical thinking, aligning with broader educational goals. Ultimately, teachers could encourage students to reflect on the personal or societal relevance of the values encountered, thus connecting language learning with personal development.

C. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the corpus is limited in scale, comprising only 5 texts from three volumes of one textbook series. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized and their representativeness requires further investigation with larger and more diverse datasets. Second, the analysis focused solely on the verbal text, excluding other potential meaning-making resources in the textbooks such as images, layout, or typography, which undoubtedly contribute to the overall discourse. Future research could address these limitations by: firstly, expanding the corpus to include more texts from different textbook series or educational levels to allow for comparative studies and enhance the robustness of conclusions; secondly, adopting a multimodal discourse

analysis approach to investigate how linguistic and visual or design elements interact to construct meaning and values; thirdly, exploring the practical application of such analysis in classroom settings through action research or pedagogical experiments, assessing its actual impact on students' literacy skills and critical engagement with texts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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