

***Transitivity and Gender Representation
in Children's Fiction***

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Abstract

Transitivity has been used by critical discourse analysts to uncover the subtle connections between linguistic items and meanings. Their objective is to interpret the linguistic structure of the text in order to reveal the extent to which the construction of clauses in particular ways, and the ordering of words in each clause in a certain way, has an impact on the construction of meanings. This study seeks to exploit Halliday's theory of transitivity to examine the writer's stance towards existing gender ideologies. Our purpose is to demonstrate the ideological signification of certain representational choices. We seek to see, for example, whether or not the male and the female protagonists are endowed with the same active/passive roles, in relation to activities they engage in and the settings they are associated with. The analysis of the samples has shown that the author's linguistic choices can serve the production of unequal power relations and can lead the reader to construct an overall impression which privileges the male character over the female one.

1. Introduction

In critical discourse analysis (CDA) researchers are mainly concerned with examining how people's experiences of the world are encoded in discourse. This role of language is referred to as the ideational metafunction in systemic functional grammar (SFG). For Simpson (1993) transitivity has been considered as an important tool of analysis in critical linguistics. It has

been employed to uncover how certain meanings are foregrounded, while others are suppressed or obfuscated. In this way, the transitivity model provides one means of investigating how a reader's or a listener's perception of the meaning of a text is pushed in a particular direction and how the linguistic structure of a text effectively encodes a particular worldview. Fowler (1986) provides a useful summary of this feature of textual meaning when he says, "linguistic codes do not reflect reality neutrally; they interpret, organize, and classify the subjects of discourse. They embody theories of how the world is arranged: world-views or ideologies" (p.27). In this sense, the investigation of the 'clause' is a way to look at, not only the functioning of grammar, but at the way such functioning relates to representations. A clause is the product of three simultaneous semantic processes. It is the presentation of experience (ideational), an interactive exchange (interpersonal), and a message (textual) (Halliday, 1985).

The ideational function of the clause is concerned with the transmission of ideas. Its function is that of representing 'processes' or 'experiences': actions, events, processes of consciousness and relations. The term "process" is used in an extended sense, "to cover all phenomena...and anything that can be expressed by a verb: event, whether physical or not, state, or relation" (Halliday. & Hasan, 1976, P. 159). Halliday (1985) further notes that the "processes" expressed through

language are the product of our conception of the world or point of view. He argues that our most powerful conception of reality is that it consists of “*goings-on*”: of doing, happening, feeling, being. These goings-on are sorted out in the semantic system of the language, and expressed through the grammar of the clause in the system of transitivity.

2. Hallydian Transitivity Structures

Transitivity specifies the different types of process that are recognized in the language and the structures by which they are expressed. These processes could be material, mental, behavioural, verbal or relational. Material processes refer to ‘doing’; physical actions in the real world and the participants are: the actor (the one who does the action), the goal (the one who is affected by the action), the recipient (the one who receives something) and the beneficiary (the one for whom something is done). The mental processes are processes of perception, cognition and affection. The sensor is the one who does the mental action, the phenomenon is the thing that is perceived, thought, or appreciated. The relational processes express possession, equivalence, attributes...and the process of saying expresses the relationship between ideas constructed in human consciousness and the ideas enacted in the form of language. It includes the sayer (the participant who is

speaking), the target (addressee to whom the process is directed) and the verbiage (what is said).

3. Power and ideology in children's fiction

Many researchers, interested in the study of gender representation in fiction pay particular attention to material processes. Sunderland (2011) notices that the passive girl has constantly been represented, especially in traditional narratives, through the same grammatical choices: few action verbs, few goal-directed actions, frequent role as a goal and/or phenomenon of other people's doing. She argues that "Opposite choices would represent girl as a strong and self-reliant personality in radical versions (2011, p. 198–9).

Halliday's transitivity theory provides a useful linguistic framework for uncovering the main linguistic features of hidden assumptions about gender in literary discourse. Knowles and Malmkjaer (1996) characterize transitivity in a "three-part way as the 'processes which take place in the (fictional) world, the participants in them and the circumstances attendant on them'" (P. 77). Sunderland (2011) on the other hand points out that "The 'participants' in a work of fiction are the narrator and the characters (adult, child, human, animal, female, male, protagonist, subordinate. Grammatically, they may be subjects, direct objects or indirect objects"(P.65). Similarly, Van Leeuwen (2008) argues that representations can provide social actors with either

active or passive roles. "Activation occurs when social actors are represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity, passivation when they are represented as "undergoing" the activity, or as being "at the receiving end of it" (2008, p.46). This may be realized through grammatical choices to activate social actors who are then "coded as actors in material processes, behaviors in behavioral processes, sensers in mental processes, sayers in verbal processes, or assigners in relational processes" (Halliday, 1985, P. 5).

4. Text selection

We have selected 'Tears and Joys' and 'The Blue Mountain' to conduct our analysis. The main reason that stands behind our choice of the two texts for comparison is the presence of a female protagonist in one of the stories and a male protagonist in the other.

The book¹, from which the two stories have been taken, was written by the Algerian writer Wahid Sekkouti in 2006. In the preface, the writer informs his audience that the stories are both realistic and fanciful. The stories are accompanied by colourful illustrations designed by Bechkit Karim.

¹. وحيد سكوتي، (2006)، قصص عجائب و عبر، الجزائر، دار المعرفة.

5. Method

We have drawn on the grammatical notions of transitivity introduced in Halliday's SFG (1985, 1994) to focus on the clause as a representational unit. The focus was on the different processes related to a female and a male character to see how the writer represents the characters' experiences of the world through his linguistic choices. We have, for instance investigated the frequent use of transitive and intransitive verbs and their association with the characters to show that female and male characters do not have the same impact on the world. The stories have been analysed according to three processes: the material, the mental and the verbal. Selected examples of the types of processes were classified in tables and then interpreted.

6. Analysis

6.1 The processes related to the female character

The main character in 'Tears and Joy' is called Maria. The way she is connected to the different processes can be very revealing in terms of ideology and power relations.

6.1.1 The Mental Processes

The initial part of the text is full of mental processes related to both Maria and her brother, however the processes, related directly to her, starts from line 58. The distribution is not regular, except for a few instances (lines 10, 11, 12) the writer tells the reader about what

Maria knows, feels or thinks and then several lines are written before he connects her to mental processes again.

Table 1

Mental processes

Sensor	Process	Phenomenon	Circumstance
She	does not see	him	
She	was looking	at the prince	
she	contemplated	the surroundings	
She	knew	he was the prince	riding a white horse
she	preferred	to stay	hidden by the tree branches
she	knew	there was a secret	
she	found out	the horse was a symbol of pride and power	quickly
she	decided	to come down from the tree	
she	regretted	her decision	
she	refused	to come down	
she	wanted	to be sure	
she	accepted	to come down	Suddenly
she	remembered	her brother	
she	refused	to marry the prince	Inside the man' house
she	found	herself	
she	had forgiven	him	

There are more desiderative verbs such as (prefer, want, decide, refuse, accept) and cognitive verbs (know, remember, find out, recognize) than perceptive and emotive verbs. The examples of the verbs listed in the table do not really make the reader excited about knowing Maria or seeking to imitate her. Most of her experiences of the world are mental and emotional and not of great significance. The use of perceptive verbs such as feel, taste, hears, smell, among others, could have made Maria's inner world more interesting. It seems that the writer himself is not interested or excited about what Maria is experiencing. The processes suggest that Maria is fragile and innocent. There are not verbs such as 'hate', 'despise' and other verbs related to hatred or anger. The frequent use of the verbs 'refuse' and 'accept' reflect Maria's shaky world.

6.1.2 The Material Processes Related to Maria

We can notice that there are many lines related to Maria's material processes. This remark gives rise to an important question: Does this mean that the female character is depicted as having a great impact on the world? Classifying the processes according to the position of Maria in the clause would clarify things as regard the writer's depiction of Maria's experience of the world.

Table 2
Material processes

Actor	Process	Goal
Maria	Pushed	Her brother
She	Climbed	A tree
(She)	Put	Her brother on her
She	Accompanied	shoulder
She	Begged	The prince
She	Pointed	Him
The	Grabbed	At the boy
mother	spent	Her son
she		Several months

Maria appears as the doer for seven times only. The verbs selected to describe her actions do not denote any physical or intellectual capacities. These processes translate her powerlessness and lack of involvement in other people's lives and activities. The things she manages to do, most of the time, result from her maternal needs to protect her brother first and her son later.

Table 3
Maria is the goal

Actor	Process	Goal
The witch		
She (witch)	Beat	Maria
She(witch)	Put	Her in a bag
The prince	Took	Her to her place
He	Married	The girl
The mother-in-law	Pushed	Her away
	took	Her precious
The soldiers	Took	jewels
The witch	Dragged	Her outside the
The old man	Accompanied	village
		Her
		Her

Maria is present as the goal in nine clauses. In many lines, she is badly treated, by either the mean witch or her husband. Even as a goal, Maria is not allowed too much space. Here again we can connect this to the writer's lack of enthusiasm towards this character. Maria does not find herself concerned with other people's experiences. The others do not do things to her. Her brother, who has turned into a deer, is helpless, and her son is too young. Even her husband is not offered the opportunity to affect Maria's life positively.

Table 4
The Goal is absent

Actor	Process
She	Run
She	Sat
She	Drank
She	Waited
She	Slept
She	Woke up
Maria	Came down
Maria	Got pregnant
The wife	Came near the prince
Maria	Was walking
She	Fainted
Maria	Woke up
Maria	Went outside
The poor girl	Fainted

These processes explain once again why Maria does not appear as the doer or the goal frequently. In 12 clauses she seems to be the only participant. Maria is depicted as passive, lonely and helpless. She does not seem to be in harmony with the world. The fact that Maria is associated with so many intransitive verbs means that she is incapable of taking actions and initiatives.

6.1.3 The Verbal Processes

Table 5

Verbal processes

Sayer	Process	Receiver	Verbiage
Maria	Said	To her brother	Do not come close to the river
She	Told	Him(her brother)	She would never abandon him
The prince	Asked	Her	To come down
She	Told	The prince	She would jump from the tree
He (the prince)	Told	Her (Maria)	He would respect her wish
The girl	Told	Him(the prince) 2times	She was ready to come down
She	told	him	About herself and her brother
She	Told	The family	The whole story
They	Told	Her	She was safe with them
The prince	confessed	To his wife	What he had done was wrong

When the writer reports Maria's speech he uses short sentences. When Maria speaks, she just responds to the interlocutor's questions or commands. There is no space for explanations, arguments, or protests. The sentence, 'She told him the whole story', cuts the way for the reader to know what is really going on in the mind of Maria. The ending of the story holds another surprise; the writer does not allow Maria to defend herself or to blame the prince about what he has done to her or to her brother. After all the difficulties she has been through, she simply tells her husband that she has forgiven him' Nothing is special about Maria being the receiver of the speech; she is either informed that her brother is still alive or that the prince has forgiven her. The story at the level of the verbal processes is very disappointing. The female character is rather voiceless.

6.2. The Processes related to the male character

Zachary is the name of the protagonist in '*The Blue Mountain*.' Unlike Maria, who is backgrounded in several parts of the story, Zachary is shown taking the lead in most of the settings.

6.2.1 The Mental Processes Used by Zachary

The distribution of the lines related to Zachary's mental processes suggests that the writer does not miss any opportunity to tell the reader about the protagonist's emotions, feelings or inner thoughts.

Table 6
Mental processes

Sensor	Process	Phenomenon	Circumstance
He	Observe/ Contemplat e	The traders' activities	
Zachar y	Saw	An old man	In one of the market corners
Zachar y	Heard	This speech	
The poor	Felt	So happy	
He	Felt	Hot/ suffocated	
He	Stayed		In one of the corners
He	Enjoyed	The sight of a herd of wild animals	
He	Saw	A squadron of strange birds	
He	Decided	To open the door	
He	Saw	A charming view	
He	remembere d	The giant's recommendations	
He	Found	Himself	In the beautiful girl's village

The mental processes related to Zachary outnumber the mental processes related to Maria. Most of Zachary's activities are outdoors. His experience of the world is

richer and more exciting. The verbs used to describe the cognitive, the perceptive, the desiderative and the emotive processes are indeed numerous. This frequent use of mental processes translates the writer's interest in Zachary's inner thoughts. The repetition of verbs such as: see, remember, feel and find, denotes the writer's eagerness to follow every single move Zachary makes.

6.2.2 The Material Processes Related to Zachary

Table 7

Zachary is the doer

Actor	Process	Goal
the young man	Approached	Him
he	Put	His hand
The young man	entered	The market
the boy	Made	A deal
Zachary	Received	A big amount of All the goods
The young man	built	A big house
He	bought	Clothes and
He	cut	furniture
He	hugged	His hand
He	opened	The old man
He	prepared	The doors His food/ luggage

Zachary appears as the doer of the action in 17 clauses. Most of the actions reveal the character's ability to affect the world. The frequent distribution of the processes within the story clearly shows that Zachary is involved mainly as an initiator or an agent, who affects and takes control of what is happening. The difficulties he encounters oblige him to respond.

The verb (approach) denotes the character's courage. The verb (open) is repeated for five times, to reflect Zachary's curiosity, courage and love for adventure. The verbs (buy and build) translate his psychological needs to construct, possess and own things. While Maria does things to protect her brother or to please her husband, Zachary does things to satisfy his curiosity and his needs and to escape the danger.

Table 8
Zachary is the goal

Actor	Process	Goal
She (mother)	Sent	him
The giant	Held	the young man
He (giant)	Got out	him
He	Put	him on his chest
The girl's image	Increased	Zachary's anger
The giant	Put	Zachary on his back

Zachary appears as the patient in seven clauses only. This is due to his appearance in different settings with different persons. Unlike Maria who is portrayed either accompanied by her brother or her husband, Zachary is rather independent; he does not need someone to do things to him. He even leaves his mother, the only person who cares for him, to explore the world.

Table 9
The Goal is absent

Actor	Process
The young man	jumped
The young man	Went out
He	Came back
He	Came closer
He	Came nearer
He	Run (5 times)
The young man	slept
He	Hid
He	Walked
He	Hurried
Zachary	Went/hid
The young man	Went out

These processes highlight Zachary's hectic life. The frequent repetition of the verb of movement (run) is to accelerate the rhythm of the story. While Maria seeks

refuge on a tree and refuses to take any risks- when the prince orders her to come down- Zachary chooses to face the danger; he runs and hides but he never gives up.

Table10

Zachary is the beneficiary

Actor	Process	Beneficiary	Goal
The giant	Gave	Zachary	Seven keys

Zachary appears as the beneficiary in only one clause; when the giant gives him the seven keys. It is indeed worth a million favours. Unlike Zachary, Maria is not connected to any material process where she has the status of the beneficiary.

6.2.3. The Verbal Processes

Table12

Verbal processes

Sayer	Process	Receiver	Verbiage
He	Murmured		“I will sell myself/ I will be rich”
The son	Told	His mother	About all what had happened
She (mother)	Asked	Him	To give back the money to the old man

He	Told	Her (mother)	There was nothing to worry about
The mother	Ordered	Her son	Not to go back to the market
He	Asked	her (mother)	To take care of herself
The old man	Told	The boy	They arrived at the right place
He	Said		“ it is quite simple, let us kill one of the horses”
He	Told	Him	He was his best companion
Zachary	Told	The strange creature	The whole story
The giant	Told	Him	“you can open all the doors except the seventh one”
He (giant)	Told	Him	To go to the same place
He	Told	Her	He did what he did because he wanted to marry her.

He	Said	To her	“ Beautiful young girl, I will give you...
He (Zachary)	Told	Him	What happened
The kind giant	Informed	The young man	That the place...
He (giant)	Told	Him	He could never come back again.

Zachary takes part in most of the dialogues. The verbal processes with which he is connected, either as the sayer or the receiver, reflect the interest that the writer gives to this character. Zachary is the receiver in most of the lines. The identity of the sayer changes according to the different settings and the different activities he engages in.

Conclusion

The analysis of the samples in terms of transitivity shows that the choices made by the author can justify the overall impression the reader gets of the girl as a passive character, who does not take initiatives by being always dependent and can never manage to escape from danger without help. In this case linguistic choices aid the creation of unequal relations of power. The distribution

of transitive/intransitive verbs is unequal and not in favour of the female characters.

Another fact observed in the investigation of gender through the material process is the frequency of the distribution of the actions. Such a choice of allocating assignments to the characters is very significant. Indeed, it is the frequency with which a certain syntactic option is selected that contributes to conveying a particular experience. Most of the time it is the male character who does things and take initiatives. The female character is portrayed as highly emotional and dependent. Her emotional side is especially apparent when she is represented in mother-son relationships.

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