

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transitivity in the Speeches of Malcolm X: A Message to the Grassroots as an Example

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the process types used in the speeches of Malcolm X. The speech that is chosen is entitled A Message to the Grassroots. In order to achieve this objective, I relied on Transitivity as explained in Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). Transitivity involves six process types (e.g. material process). The questions that this article attempts to answer are: (1) did Malcolm rely on all or some of the six process types?, (2) have they served the purpose? and (3) which process type is most frequent in the speech? The results show that all process types are attested in Malcolm X's speech. It turns out that material process (41.61%) is the most frequent whereas existential (2.07%) and behavioral (1.15%) are the least frequent. Since Malcolm did not advocate peaceful revolutions, he was inclined to use material process, which is associated with action and happening. Thus material process is proven to be compatible with his militant ideology and his criticism of peaceful revolutions. As for relational and mental processes, they were needed because he aimed at persuading his audience to adopt his viewpoint concerning subservient and obedient black civil rights leaders.

1. Introduction

Transitivity system plays an essential part in construing our inner and outer experience into "a manageable set of PROCESS TYPES" (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p.170). Such process types (i.e. material process, mental process, verbal process, existential process, relational process and behavioral process) are often associated with certain types of discourse. For example, the verbal process permeates news reports, the mental process is preferable in conversations and the material process is often attested in recipes and other procedural texts (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004). However, political speeches are not confined to a certain process type; some or all of these process types can be utilized in political speeches. It is the speakers' choices that determine which process type is most frequent in the speech. Since Malcolm X was a prominent civil rights leader and a competent orator, who attracted large audiences, his speeches have drawn the attention of scholars not only in the US, but also in other parts of the world. His famous speech A

Message to the Grassroots, which was delivered in Detroit in 1963, is worthy of study from a transitivity perspective.

2. The Purpose of this Study

This study aimed to examine transitivity in the speech of Malcolm X, who was a prominent black activist in the USA in the 1960s. The aim is to identify and classify the process types that Malcolm X adopted in his speech and to determine which process type was preferable to him. These Process types are identified by examining the verb in the clause: material clauses, relational clauses, mental clauses, verbal clauses, existential clauses and behavioral clauses. Fairclough (1995) holds that choosing which processes of transitivity to describe the course of event implies cultural, political or ideological significance. Thus the choice of process type depends on the purpose and objectives the speaker aspires to achieve and it depends on his political, cultural and ideological affiliations.

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3. The Significance

The preferable processes or clause types in procedural texts are known to be material clauses whereas news reports are more likely to contain verbal clauses (cf. Halliday 1990, 174). In conversations, the clause type that is used is mental clause. In Malcolm X's speeches, all types of clauses are attested and discovering the most common clause type may reveal the secret of his effectiveness and his popularity.

4. Literature Review

There are many researchers that tackled political speeches by using Systematic Functional Grammar/linguistics or Transitivity system. Among the politicians and leaders whose speeches have been analyzed are Donald Trump, a Filipino senator, Filipino presidents, Queen Elizabeth and Martin Luther King.

Hidayat (2018) has employed Systematic Functional Grammar in order to study the transitivity patterns and their meanings in Donald Trump's inaugural speech. This descriptive qualitative study aimed to answer questions pertaining to process types and to explain the contextual meaning associated with them. The result of the research showed that Trump relied on all processes. It turned out that material process is the most frequent in the speech, with relational, behavioral and verbal process coming next. The existential and verbal are the least frequent processes. These process types are shown to be instrumental in conveying the meaning the speaker aimed to achieve.

Balog (2019) has used Halliday (1994)'s transitivity model to analyze the speeches of a female senator in Philippines. Balog used both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to reveal the role of transitivity processes in uncovering social problems, inequality, and power abuse in the Filipino political arena. It has been shown that the material process comes first in the senator's speeches. The relational and verbal processes come next. The material process is mainly used to expose those who are involved in illegal activities and to combat workplace discrimination of women. The relational processes are employed to explain some concepts and to refer to negative character traits. As for the verbal processes, they are utilized to emphasize her ideas.

Manzano and Orquijo (2020) have studied the transitivity processes in the inaugural speeches of Filipino presidents from 1899 to 2016. Relying on Halliday (1985)'s Transitivity System Model, they

were able to pinpoint the transitivity processes in these speeches. It has been found that all processes are attested, with the material process being the most recurring process in the speeches. This process is shown to be useful in suggesting solutions to the problems facing the country. The relational process is shown to be the second most frequent process for it has been useful in explaining concepts and in delineating the responsibility of the people and the government. As for the mental process, it is used in order for the presidents to express their opinions, dispositions, political beliefs, and desires to incentivize people to help the government in coping with the challenges and future aspirations.

Luo (2020) has studied the British Queen's speech on covid-19. Using the Systematic Functional Linguistics as a frame of reference, the researcher has analyzed the process types used in the speech. The study has shown that the Queen has utilized four process types: the material process, the mental process, the relational process and the verbal process. The speech aimed at expressing gratitude to the health workers and at encouraging people to take precautions during the difficult times.

Weixuan and Zheng (2022) have conducted a transitivity analysis of the parliament speech delivered by the British Queen. Using a qualitative and a quantitative methods and relying on Halliday (2004)'s Systematic Functional Linguistics, the researchers have shown that the speech has utilized four process types: the material process, the relational process, the mental process, and the existential process. The material process has turned out to be the most frequent type. The relational process and the mental process are the next, with the existential being the last. The remaining two processes, the verbal and behavioral, are not attested in the speech. Thus the study has indicated the importance of the role played by linguistic structure in revealing and reflecting the implied meaning in discourse.

It seems that all political speeches have material process, which is the most frequent in all these speeches. The relational process comes next in all the speeches. It is noted that there are few instances of existential process and behavioral process. What explains the preponderance of material process in such political speeches is that all these politicians (e.g. Queen Elizabeth) aimed at persuading or encouraging the public to do something; they were also keen to remind them of their responsibilities towards their country.

The speeches of Malcolm X had had their share of academic attention. Both his seminal speeches (Who taught you to hate yourself? and A Message to the Grassroots) have been studied from different perspectives. D'Ambrosio (2015) has compared two famous speeches: Martin Luther King's speech I have a Dream and Malcolm X's A Message to the Grassroots. D'Ambrosio relies on Halliday (2004)'s Systematic Functional Grammar and Fairclough's 3D Model, which is comprised of three dimensions: text, discursive practice and social practice. It has been shown that this model can help deconstruct the two speeches and can be useful in comparing them in terms of the linguistic tools employed. The speeches of these two speakers are also studied with the purpose of showing how effective and impactful these tools are on their respective audiences. The effectiveness and impactfulness of a speech in exposing racism and bigotry is often ascribed to the use of language.

Fitriyani (2018) has studied Malcolm's speech entitled Who taught to hate yourself?. Using Fairclough's (1992) CDA theory, which relies on linguistic and intertextual analysis, the researcher has attempted to reveal the ideology on which the speech is based. The qualitative analysis has revealed the elements that contribute to the meaning of the text. In a nutshell, the speaker repeatedly expressed his desire to act against racial discrimination in the United States.

Although the speech entitled A Message to Grassroots has been studied by D'Ambrosio; nevertheless, the study did not pay special attention to the transitivity system in the speech. Rather, the analysis concentrated on the linguistic and rhetorical tools such as lexical items (both positive and negative), parallelism, and metaphors. This study is an attempt to fill this gap and to cover this missing part in the speeches of Malcolm X.

5. Research Questions

This research aims to answer these three questions.

1. Did Malcolm X rely on all or some of the six process types?
2. which process type is most frequent in the speech?
3. Did they serve the purpose of his speech?

6. Methodology

6.1 Data Collection

Malcolm X's speech entitled A Message to the Grassroots was delivered in Detroit in 1963 when

Malcolm was the spokesman for the Nation of Islam. This is a relatively long speech containing 3787 words. The speech is available on YouTube. However, I was able to obtain a transcript from a Web site (<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/>) that displays very influential speeches. The classification follows the criteria introduced in Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). I began by examining the clauses and giving special attention to verbs because the verb is considered the key for determining the process types (e.g. material process, mental process etc.). An attempt is made to assign each verb to a process type. As soon as the process type is identified and verified, it becomes easier to designate the participants and circumstances. Relational process is shown to come in two modes: the identifying and the attributive. The former mode is concerned with identifying the subject, whereas the latter with determining the characteristics or qualities of an entity. This classification can help us figure out how this process is used and which mode is prevalent in the speech. As for the mental process, an attempt is made to examine the verbs serving this process with the purpose of specifying which type is preferred: cognition or perception or affection/emotion.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been utilized for the analysis of the speech. The qualitative analysis has been useful in identifying the themes and concepts that the speaker was trying to emphasize and the relations he attempted to highlight, and the ideas he wanted to instill in the minds of his audience. All in all, the speaker, by using the appropriate process types, aimed to achieve certain motives and publicize certain ideologies. As for the quantitative analysis, it has been used so that the most common process types could be identified. It has also been useful in identifying the most frequent mode (i.e. identifying or attributive) in relation process and the most preferable type in mental process (e.g. cognition) in the speech.

6.2 The Framework

Language has three functions or metafunctions: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. Ideational function is concerned with the idea or content that an utterance contains. In other words, it is concerned with the way our experience is represented in language. Interpersonal function refers to the way speakers use language for the expression of interpersonal relations. Textual function is concerned

with choices relating to the way elements are ordered in a clause and with the choices (e.g. reference, substitution etc) associated with the way cohesion is systematically realized.

One of the elements of ideational function is the transitivity system. The study depends on transitivity as introduced in Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). They define transitivity as “a system of clause affecting not only the verb serving as process but also participants and circumstances.” (p. 174). According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), the transitivity system “construes the world of experience into a manageable set of PROCESS TYPES.” Process here refers to “anything that can be expressed by a verb: event, whether physical or not, state, or relation” (Halliday, 1976, p. 159). There are six process types that the transitivity system construes.

1. Material Process

This is concerned with actions and events. This process is always used “in recipes and other procedural texts” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004, p.174).

2. Relational Process

This process relates “one fragment of experience to another” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p.170). This process has three types: intensive, possessive and circumstantial. Each one of them comes in two modes: attributive and identifying.

3. Mental Process

This is concerned with “our experience of the world of our own consciousness” (Halliday & Matthiessen

2004, p. 197). The verbs serving this process is related to perception, cognition or emotions. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) have indicated, this process is “very typical of conversation” (p. 198); they also describe it as “the casual conversation typical motif” (p. 174).

4. Behavioral Process

These are “processes of (typically human) physiological and psychological behavior like breathing, coughing, smiling, dreaming and staring.” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p.248).

5. Verbal Process

This “process of a ‘verbal’ clause is realized by a verbal group where the lexical verb is one of saying” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p.254). This process is considered preferable in news reports (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p.174).

6. Existential Process

This process “represents that something exists or happens” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p. 256). Verbs serving as process in such clauses include ‘exist’, ‘remain’, ‘arise’, ‘follow’, ‘stand’, ‘lie’, ‘grow’, ‘emerge’ (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p.258). Note that Existential clauses are not very common in discourse, but in narrative, [t]hey serve to introduce central participants ... at the beginning of a story” (Hasan 1984 ch3, cited in Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p.257).

The following table shows the participants associated with each of the process types:

Table 1. *process type and participants*

Process	Participant
Material	Actor, Goal, Attribute, Client, Scope
Mental	senser, phenomenon
Verbal	sayer, receiver, verbiage
Existential	Existent
Relational	Carrier, Attribute; Token, Value
Behavioral	Behavior, Behavior

Examples.

1. The lion caught the tourist

Actor Material process Goal

2. I hate this man

Senser Mental process phenomenon

3. He said that he would come.

Sayer Verbal process Verbiage

4. There was a hurricane

existential process Existent

5. a. JOHN is a teacher

Carrier Relational Process Attribute

b. JOHN is the teacher

Token/identified Relational process Value/
Identifier

6. The boy is laughing

Behavior Behavioral process

7. Analysis and Discussion

7.1 The Categorization and Frequency of Process Types

The following table shows the frequency of each process type and its frequency in the speech of Malcolm X.

Table 2. *Process Types*

Percentage	No.	Process
41.61	181	Material
32.87	143	Relational
13.8	60	Mental
8.50	37	Verbal
2.07	9	Existential
1.15	5	Behavioral
100%	435	Total

The mental process occupies the third position occurring 60 times and it has a frequency count of 13.8%. This is followed by verbal process, recurring 37 times, with a percentage of 8.50%. The last two process types with the least frequency count are existential and behavioral processes: existential process scores 2.07%, whereas behavioral process has the least frequency count of 1.15%.

Table 3. *Attributive and Identifying modes in Relational clauses*

Relational Process Modes	Token/Identified Value/Identifier	Carrier Attribute	Total
Number	44	99	143
percentage	30.8%	69.2%	100%

As table (3) indicates, the attributive mode is the most frequent: out of the 143 instances of relational clauses in the speech of Malcolm, 69.2% is considered attributive that is accompanied by carrier and attribute. In contrast, the other mode (the identifying) occurs only 44 times and it has a frequency count of 30.8%.

The following table is concerned with mental clauses, which appear in three types depending on the verb serving as process: mental clause of cognition, mental

Table 4. *Mental clause*

Mental Clause	Cognition	Affection/Emotion	Perception	Total
Number	31	22	7	60
percentage	51.7	36.6	11.7	100

7.2 Process Types in Malcolm X's Speech

In 1963 Malcolm X was the spokesman for the Nation of Islam in the United States. He delivered a speech in Detroit. In this well-known speech (A Message to the Grassroots), which contains 3787 words, Malcolm expressed his dissatisfaction with the Civil Rights Movement and the Washington rally organized by Martin Luther King and other black activists. He even made a mockery of King's We Shall Over Come speech and the singing that characterized the movement. Malcolm also openly criticized the black

As table (2) shows, material process occurs 181 times, with a frequency count of 41.61%, which makes it the most recurring type in the speech. It is closely followed by relational process, which occurs 143 times, with 32.87%.

Table (3) provides us with information concerning the two modes of relational clause: the identifying mode and the attributive mode. The former type has two elements: identified/token and identifier/value. Likewise, the latter type has two elements: carrier and attribute.

clause of perception and mental clause of affection or emotion.

Table (4) shows that mental clauses of cognition are the most frequent: they occur 31 times, with a frequency count of 51.7%. It is followed by mental clauses of affection or emotion, which recur 22 times, constituting 36.6%. The mental clauses of perception are the least frequent in the speech: they occur only 7 times, with a frequency count of 11.7%.

activists who were obedient to whites; he described them as "house negroes". He made a contrast between them and the "field negroes". The latter group constituting the grassroots were defiant and militant. He argues in this speech that a revolution is by its nature must be violent because peaceful revolutions end up in failure.

7.3 Material Clauses

Each of the following clauses contains the verb 'catch'. This verb, which recurs six times in the speech, refers

to an experience in the outside world, in the cities and towns of the United States.

1. You don't catch hell because you're a Baptist, and you don't catch hell because you're a Methodist.
2. You don't catch hell because you're a Methodist or Baptist.
3. You don't catch hell because you're a Democrat or a Republican, you don't catch.
4. You catch hell because you're a black man.
5. You catch hell, all of us catch hell, for the same reason.

This repeated process emphasizes the fact that blacks are subjected to the worst type of racism and this racism is not because of their religious or political affiliation, but because of their skin color.

The following material clauses are ushered by verbs such as 'come', 'be brought'. Such verbs indicate that the black people did not arrive at the American shores by their will, rather they were forcefully taken from their homes and were sold in the USA.

6. You didn't come here on the "Mayflower."
7. You came here on a slave ship. In chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken.
8. You were brought here by the people who came here on the "Mayflower,".
9. You were brought here by the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers.

In the following excerpt, Malcolm repeated the word 'colonized' four times. Note that the passive form is used here with the verb serving as material process. The material clauses refer to what was happening then, that is, colonization as a reality at that time.

That there one African came from Kenya and was being colonized by the Englishman, and another African came from the Congo and was being colonized by the Belgian, and another African came from Guinea and was being colonized by the French, and another came from Angola and was being colonized by the Portuguese.

The following clauses contain such material process verbs as 'bled', 'bleed', and 'bite'.

10. Long as the white man sent you to Korea, you bled.
11. He sent you to Germany, you bled.

12. He sent you to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese, you bled.

13. You bleed for white people.

14. You bleed when the white man says bleed.

15. you bite when the white man says bite.

The choice of these words reflects the idea the speaker had of black people: they were so subservient that they would obey orders without questions.

7.4 Mental Clauses

The verbs serving as mental process include 'looked at', 'learn', 'realize', 'recognize'; in the following clause, the verbs 'learned' and 'realized' serve as mental process, which indicates that the colonized people have managed to understand their colonizers.

16. They... learned or realized the one thing that all of them had in common -- they were all from Europe, they were all Europeans, blond, blue-eyed and white skins. Another mental clause includes the verb 'recognize' as a cognitive process. This has shown that the colonized knew the countries where their enemies came from; they came from one area: Europe.

17. They began to recognize who their enemy was. Similarly, in this clause another cognitive verb is used to serve as process: the verb 'realize'. The mental clause shows that the whole world was not aware where the dark man was oppressed and exploited, but at that conference they became aware of all facts.

18. They realized all over the world where the dark man was being oppressed.

7.5 Relational Clauses

The relational process type (the possessive type) dominates the following clauses. These clauses, in which the word 'common' occurs eight times, refer to the relation among black folks; they have a common enemy: the white man. The white man oppresses, exploits, and discriminates against all of them. Put differently, all of them are equally oppressed, exploited and discriminated. Only by strengthening their relationship could they stand up to the white oppressors, exploiters and discriminators.

19. We have a common enemy.

20. We have this in common: We have a common oppressor, a common exploiter, and a common discriminator.

21. But once we all realize that we have a common enemy, then we unite -- on the basis of what we have in common.

22. And what we have foremost in common is that enemy -- the white man.

These relational clauses involve different modes. Most of them are of the attributive type where the participant is introduced as a carrier. However, the last clause (29) has a different mode: identifying. In this clause, the speaker identifies “what we have foremost in common” as that enemy—the white man.

The following relational clauses refer to the relation between America and black people: both America and the black people have a problem. America has a problem: the black people are her pain in the neck, and black people have a problem: they are not wanted in the United States. By using the attributive mode the speaker failed to pinpoint the exact nature of the problem.

23. We all agree tonight, all of the speakers have agreed, that America has a very serious problem.

24. Not only does America have a very serious problem, but our people have a very serious problem. However, in the following clauses, in which the identifying mode is used, the speaker attempts to identify and delineate the problem that remains unidentified in the previous clauses:

25. America’s problem is us.

26. The only reason she has a problem is she doesn’t want us here. In all these clauses the part before the relation process (e.g. America’s problem in 32) is the token/identified and what follows it is the value or identifier (i.e. ‘us’). In the following clauses, Malcolm X relies on relational process in order to describe black people; he wants to tell their actual position and status in America.

27. So we’re all black people, so-called Negroes, second-class citizens, ex-slaves.

28. You’re nothing but an ex-slave. The process type used here is relational and the attributive mode is quite appropriate here in stating the obvious: we’re all black people. Note that all these relational clauses involve attributive mode; they contain two elements: carrier and attribute.

29. Some of them were Buddhists, some of them were Muslims, some of them were Christians, some were Confucianists, some were atheists.

30. Some were communists, some were socialists, some were capitalists.

31. All of them were black, brown, red or yellow. The aim here is to refer to the relation among these people. These clauses reiterate the fact that these people at the Bandung conference were not a homogeneous group; in fact, they did belong to different cultures and adopted different ideologies. When the speaker wanted to draw our attention to the element that was not invited in the conference, he resorted to the identifying mode of relational clauses as in.

32. The number one thing that was not allowed to attend the Bandung Conference was the white man. In this clause, “the number one thing that was not allowed to attend the conference” is the token/identified and “the white man” is the value/identifier. In (40-43) Malcolm depends on relational clauses. All these clauses except the last one are negated to show that these colored people at Bandung had no relationship with nuclear weapons, jet planes or heavy armaments. These weapons were in the possession of the white man. The only positive relational clause at the end indicates that the only thing they possessed was unity.

33. These people who came together didn’t have nuclear weapons,

34. They didn’t have jet planes. they didn’t have all of the heavy armaments that the white man has.

35. But they had unity.

7.6 Verbal Clauses

The lexical verb serving as verbal process is that of ‘saying’; that a verbal clause may contain two elements: the sayer and verbiage. Most of the verbal clauses in the speech of Malcolm X contain the verb ‘say’.

36. If the master said, “We got a good house here,” the house Negro “Yeah, we got a good house here.”

37. Whenever the master said we, he said we.

38. If the master got sick, the house Negro would say, “What’s the matter, boss, we sick?”

39. If someone came to you right now and said, “Let’s separate,” you’d say the same thing that the house Negro said on the plantation, “What you mean, separate? From America? This good white man? Where you going to get a better job than you get here?”

40. He'd say, "Anyplace is better than here."

41. They say, "The government is in trouble."

Note here that the verbal clauses are used to ridicule and mock the behavior of obsequiously submissive black people. Such people would do whatever possible to please others. The speaker brought the behavior of slaves in the past and projected it onto the present day behavior of some black people, including some community leaders: some black people were satisfied with the status quo and they would not rise up to improve the quality of their lives. It is such people that Malcolm was scolding by way of using verbal clauses. Thus verbal clauses have enabled the speaker to turn subservient people into a subject of laughter and ridicule for their outrageous behavior.

7.7 Existential Clauses

These clauses often begin with the word 'there', followed by a form of verb "to be" as process.

42. There were two kinds of slaves, the house Negro and the field Negro.

Note that the nominal group after the process is the existent. Malcolm X refers to a reality that was undeniable before the emancipation of slaves in the US. He would like to ascertain that some former slaves have not got rid of the slave mentality for they kept "licking up to" the white man and kept using obsequious compliments to gain self serving favor or advantage from another person.

7.8 Behavioral Clauses

Such clauses involve certain verbs such 'bark', 'scream', 'pray' and 'brag'. Malcolm X's speech has few instances of behavioral clauses. In the following behavioral clauses, the speaker is drawing a contrast between the behavior of house negroes and field negroes. The house negro is portrayed as a dog which obeys its master and does everything it is told. This house negro would not stop expressing his satisfaction with his way of life and would even brag about the crumbs they threw to him.

43. ...and you bark when the white man says bark.

44. ...and then brag about "I'm the only Negro out here." "I'm the only one on My job." "I'm the only one in this school."

In contrast, the field negro was never submissive or contented with his life; he would pray the master's house would reduce to ashes by fire and the master would die.

45. That field Negro prayed for a wind, for a breeze.

46. When the master got sick, the field Negro prayed that he'd die.

8. Conclusion

This study has attempted to investigate Malcolm X's speech (A Message to the Grassroots) in the light of transitivity system. As expected, all process types are attested in the speech: material process, mental process, relational process, existential process and behavioral process. It has also been shown that the material process (41.61%) is the most frequent in Malcolm's speech. It is followed by relational (32.87%), mental (13.81%) and verbal processes (8.50%). The two remaining process types (i.e. existential (2.07%) and behavioral (1.15%)) are the least frequent in the speech of Malcolm.

The process types used in the speech are compatible with the ideas or concepts or ideologies the speaker would like to convey. The material process, which is associated with actions and happenings, reflects the speaker's negative attitude towards peaceful revolutions and his advocacy of militant revolution. The relational process is used to highlight the nature of relationship between America and the black people and the relationship between blacks. The verbal process has been effective in mocking the behavior of some black people who are submissive and contented with their life and have no aspiration for a better life. Thus it has been shown that the choice of process types in political speeches depends on the intentions of the speaker and the objectives s/he would like to achieve.

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