

CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION IN TRIBUTIVE SONGS: TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS OF THE SONG “I AM MALALA”

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Abstract. The study aimed at analysing the transitivity patterns used in the popular song “I am Malala”. The song is an attempt by the Western media to pay tribute to Malala Yousafzai – a young girl from Pakistan – internationally acknowledged for her advocacy of women’s education. The objective of the study was to analyse the character of Malala as portrayed through an anonymous girl’s voice in the song. Transitivity analysis proposed by M. A. K. Halliday under Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) served as the tool of the study. The results of the study revealed the scope of transitivity analysis in yielding a better understanding of the construction of characters in a “tributive song” composed to pay tribute to important public figures.

Key words: systemic functional grammar (SFG), transitivity patterns, transitivity analysis, character portrayal, literary discourse, song

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1. Introduction and theoretical background

Language, simply defined, is a tool of communication. An utterance is communicative only if it is meaningful. In the words of Bloor and Bloor (2004) “when people use language, their language acts produce – construct meanings”. The basic purpose of human interaction, therefore, is to construct and communicate meanings. Language is a system that provides humans with the lexico-grammatical choices to create their intended meanings. This was the stance underpinning Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by M. A. K. Halliday and his fellows in 1960s. According to Halliday (1985), language is a system of meanings while grammatical forms are meant to realize these meanings thus addressing the question of HOW meanings are formed. This meaning potential of language gives it a social or discursive value.

Language taken as a social construct or discourse does not only demonstrate reality but constructs it. Language is not just a medium of description and communication but a social behaviour – a way of doing things (Kroger and Wood 2000). For Fairclough (2003), discourse is a forceful tool to construct “realities of living and being”. The view can be extended to a literary discourse also where language is played at to construct events as well as characters involved in those events. As mentioned by Fowler (1986), literature is a discourse thus it does not express reality in a neutral way but organizes and classifies this reality in a distinctive manner. The language exploited to create events and delineate people reflects selections made out of all the choices a language system offers, hence, projecting certain meanings over others (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). In line with the view, the present study seeks how linguistic choices made in a literary text can reveal the construction of characters in it.

As reported in Nguyen (2012), Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) approaches discourse analysis by focusing on the social, semiotic and functional aspects of language. Under SFG, language performs three meta-functions, termed as ideational, interpersonal, and textual forming a systemic network of linguistic choices representing the meaning potentials (Haratyan, 2011). Ideational metafunction is expressed in the content of language, reflecting language user’s experience of the real world as perceived by him. Interpersonal metafunction manifests social relations between the participants of a communication, while, how the message is structured within a situational context comes under the textual metafunction.

Transitivity analysis being a sub-network under the ideational metafunction is used to explore the content or the experiential meaning in a text. SFG analyses a text at the level of clause. A clause is defined as a realization of events. The basic premise of transitivity analysis is to explore “who or what does what to whom or what?” (Iwamoto 2008). In simple terms, transitivity analysis is helpful in revealing the participants involved in an action, how they relate to others and if they take an active or passive role in the utterance (Nguyen, 2012). Transitivity analysis, therefore, well suited the purpose of the current study as it attempted to investigate the portrayal of the main character in the selected text.

Transitivity system mainly classifies a clause into three components. The *process* which is realized by the verb phrase, *the participant(s)* carrying out or affected by the process and usually realized by noun phrases, and, *the circumstance(s)* forming the adjunct component of the clause generally expressed by the prepositional and adverbial phrases (Simpson, 2004). The process makes up the nucleus of the clause. Halliday (1994) has identified six process types under transitivity, labelled as: Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal, Behavioural and Existential.

Material process represents “happening or doing”. It typically involves two participants: an *actor* who is the doer of the action and a *goal* towards whom the action is directed. Material processes as mentioned in Nguyen (2012) are physical and concrete actions.

Mental processes represent “perception, cognition and affection (feeling)”. It also involves two participants: a *sensor* who carries out the process and a *phenomenon* - what is perceived, thought or felt by the sensor.

Relational processes reflect the relationship of “having” and “being” between the participants. They are further categorized into *attributive* and *identifying* relational processes. Attributive category takes two participants, a *carrier* and an *attribute*. The identifying category also involves two participants, termed as a *token* and a *value*.

Attributive: “Y” is an attribute of “X”

Identifying: “Y” is an identity of “X”

(Iwamoto 2008)

Verbal process represents the act of “saying”. It includes any form of exchange of meaning, like “The booklet tells you how to find a job” or “The clock says it is ten.” It also involves two participants. The one who speaks called the *Sayer* and the one who is addressed termed as the *Target*. What is said is labelled as *Verbiage* (ibid).

Behavioural processes ‘represent outer manifestations of inner workings, the acting out of processes of consciousness and physiological states’ (Halliday 1994). These processes represent psychological or physiological behaviour and lie between the material and mental processes. They involve a single participant – the *Behaver*.

Existential process, as the name implies, asserts that something exists. These processes usually take the word *there* as a dummy subject. They also involve just one participant – the *Existent*, which refers to what exists (Mwinlaaru 2012).

Table 1. Examples of different process types adapted from Nguyen (2012)

Process Type	Examples
	(Participants underlined; Process in bold ; Circumstances in <i>Italic</i>)
Material	<u>I</u> do my exercise <i>near the lake</i>
Behavioural	<u>I</u> smile at them
Mental	<u>I</u> do not understand
Verbal	<u>They</u> say , I have acted crazy all my life
Relational	<u>I</u> am a kindly grandmother
Existential	<i>Today there's</i> <u>Christianity</u> <i>in the south</i>

Previous research shows that transitivity analysis has been a widely used analytical tool for discourse analysis. It has been applied on a variety of texts and discourses to investigate and understand how linguistic patterns encode distinctive meanings in them. It has been more rigorously applied on the language of media – news articles, political speeches. Studies conducting transitivity analysis of literary texts specifically investigating the character portrayal are relatively few.

One of the pioneering examples is M.A.K. Halliday's own research study of William Golding's "The Inheritors" (1971) which illustrated how transitivity patterns associated with the main character in the text revealed his mind make up.

Kennedy (1982) analysed a scene from Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Agent". Examining the *processes* in the scene, Kennedy attempted to explain how the selected murder scene reveals the murderer's detachment from the murder that she has actually committed.

Among the contemporary studies, using Halliday's transitivity framework, Yaghoobi (2009) has conducted a functional analysis of the news articles taken from two different newspapers. Identifying *processes* and the *participants* associated with those processes, the study proved that the depiction of same actors – Hizbullah and Israeli forces, by two different newspapers was ideologically opposed to each other.

"Transitivity and Narrative Viewpoint in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Weep Not, Child" (Mwinlaaru 2012) studied transitivity patterns in a literary text to expose the psychological viewpoint of the author as reflected in the story.

Azar & Yazdchi (2012) analysed transitivity patterns assigned to the main character "Maria" in James Joyce's short story "Clay" in order to verify a literary critique on "Maria" as a symbol of Virgin Mary in the story.

The present study has also adapted Halliday's framework of transitivity analysis to investigate character portrayal in a literary discourse. The study however is distinctive in that it intends to explicate the delineation of the main character in a song titled "I am Malala". The selected song is a tribute to Malala Yousafzai – a 16-year-old Pakistani girl from Swat Valley who has grabbed global attention after being shot by the Taliban – the so-called terrorist network - for her advocacy of girls' education in Swat while it was banned in the area by Taliban. A song as compared to other literary forms is a crisp medium for crafting characters and personalities. Important and famous public figures are often paid tribute through songs for a song can have a strong and wider appeal among audiences because of their musical and lyrical nature. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, transitivity analysis has not yet been exploited to investigate a song, portraying important public figures/characters, as a distinct literary genre.

Significance of the study. The study will be significant in reinforcing literature as a crafty medium where language is exploited to create events and build characters. It is likely to highlight the scope of transitivity analysis in yielding a critical understanding of the character sketches in literary texts, specially a song. The study can have pedagogical implications in teaching and learning literature. Teachers as well as students can benefit from the framework being an effective and convenient method for interpreting different literary genres which usually do not convey explicit meanings.

Research question. How transitivity analysis helps in interpreting the character construction in a "tributive song" portraying a public figure?

2. Methodology

The study is a close textual analysis of the selected text with a special focus on the portrayal of the main character in the text. The text selected for the study is a popular song “I am Malala” produced by the Western media, released in July, 2013, to pay tribute to Malala Yousafzai. The tool used in the study was transitivity analysis which makes up the ideational metafunction under M.A.K Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). Analytical framework for the study was adapted from Nguyen (2012). As the first step of the analysis, the text of the song has been split into clauses; as the unit of analysis in SFG is a clause. The clauses are numbered according to the order they have occurred in the text (see Appendix B) so that they can be conveniently referred to in the analysis. In the next step, each clause is categorized into “Participants” and “Processes” (see Appendix C). The circumstantial component of the clause has not been catered in the analysis because the study focused on the character portrayal so the circumstantial element was out of scope of the analysis. The types of processes have also been labelled. The data has been interpreted and discussed qualitatively.

3. Data analysis

Malala has become an internationally known figure. Many texts and discourses are being produced about her. The song “*I am Malala*” is also one of such discourses produced during this time. It is an attempt by the Western media supposedly to pay tribute to Malala. It is one of the first songs produced about her. The song has been sung by young girls of approximately Malala’s age. The video of the song shows a number of girls belonging to different nationalities and races singing the song in chorus. The lyrics of the song (see appendix A) also talk generally of all girls around the globe through a collective pronoun “*We*”, but majorly reflect an anonymous girl’s voice represented by the pronoun “*I*”, identifying with Malala as the title of the song “*I’m Malala*” and the lyrics “*I’m Malala* (16), “*Malala gave a voice to me*” (33c) suggest (see appendix B). Since the main character in the song identifies with Malala, her character portrayal can give insights about the character of Malala as it is being perceived by West – the producer of the song.

The current analysis seeks the character portrayal of Malala as reflected in the selected text through transitivity analysis. To achieve the purpose, the “Processes” as well as the “Participants” involved in the processes have been taken into consideration leaving out the circumstantial elements for being out of the scope of the current study.

A broader picture of the text has revealed that the major processes (in terms of frequency) were Relational = **24**, Material = **23** and Mental = **11**. While the other three processes: Verbal = **9**, Behavioural = **3** and Existential = **1**, had relatively nominal appearance in the text.

Table 2. Total Count of Processes

Process Type	Count
Relational	24
Material	23
Mental	11
Verbal	8
Behavioural	4
Existential	1

As the analysis is targeted towards the character portrayal of the main character in the text, the processes have been considered in relation to the participants carrying them out.

Out of a total of **71** processes the main character has been a participant in the subject position of only **20** (1b, 5c, 6a, 6b, 6c, 7a, 7b, 8a, 8b, 11a, 11b, 14a, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, & 24), represented by the pronoun **“I”**. **14** of the total processes (2a, 2b, 3a, 4a, 7c, 7d, 10a, 25a, 25b, 25c, 30c & 33b) involve an inclusive **“We”** as participant, where the main character is relating to other girls or people in general either by invoking their support or by talking about them as sharing her plight. The remaining **37** processes involve **“they”, “you”, “it”** and **“those before”** as participants, referring exclusively to people, new generation or the world in general (see appendix C).

The picture so far shows that only about one fourth of the total participant positions have been assigned to the main character who otherwise is the major figure in the text. Considering the process types, it has been found that the main character has been a participant of the majority of mental processes (i.e. 8/13). However, the majority of material processes in the song are being acted out exclusively by other people or an inclusive **“We”**.

The analysis suggests that the main character embodying Malala has been portrayed as an inspirational figure who can **“dream”** (6a), **“hope”** (8a), **“guess”** (11b), **“open... eyes”** (6b), **“shar[e]... a vision”** (6c), **“focus ... minds”** (7a). But, when it comes to **“say things loud”** (2a), **“change [the] world”** (3a), **“stand powerful”** (7d), and **“find any truth”** (32a) she needs others’ support (14a, 14b). She can give voice to other girls (33c). She inspires people to **“choose to fight for what [they] believe in”** (12), **“do what is right”** (13) and **“be clever”** (29) so as to show resistance **“when oppressed by the suppressors”** (28b). She offers people to **take a look through [her] eyes** (15c) but work themselves to **be the change [they] want to see** (15a).

Her role as a participant of the material processes is just nominal. **“I’m working on turning [the dreams] into a reality”, “and opening eyes”** & **“and sharing a vision”** (6a, 6b, 6c – three dependant clauses connected through a single process ‘working on’) is the first of the few instances in the song having a material process taking the main character in the position of an actor and that too not representing any concrete physical action but abstract notions of turning dreams into reality, opening others eyes and sharing a vision with them. The second instance of the

material process – **“how can somebody young like me even find any truth”** (32a) – is also a failed process showing her ineptness and weakness. The other two material processes involving Malala directly: **“Malala fought for education”** (27a) and **“then she fought for her life”** (27b) also refer to a spiritual and psychological fight not exactly a material action.

The most frequent of all processes in the text – the relational process – is relatively least revealing for the study thus being discussed last of all the major processes. They are mostly attributive in nature, representing analogy, which is one of the poetic devices commonly occurring in lyrical texts. A few relational processes, however, are associated with the main character in the text. These processes expose her as a carrier of attributes like; **“only young”** (11a), **“Malala”** (16), **“infinite hope”** (17), plus, an inclusive attribute **“broken inside”** (7c), referring to girls in general.

4. Findings and conclusion

Transitivity analysis is the most widely used framework under Halliday’s SFL. It has proved to have a diverse scope in text and discourse analysis. Transitivity analysis can provide a comprehensive linguistic evidence for the readers regarding “who/what does what to whom/what?” thus, to arrive at a better understanding of the characters in a literary text.

The main character in the song “I am Malala” is an anonymous girl whose voice echoes Malala’s voice thus her character has been analysed as an embodiment of Malala. Analysing the “processes” and the “participants” associated with these processes, transitivity analysis of the song revealed that Malala is just like all the girls of her age – weak, timid and inept. She is not strong enough to change the world by carrying out any concrete material action on her own. The only power they can have is **“the power of [their] speech”** (3a). But, their speech too will be heard if they speak in congregation, for speaking alone will require them to disguise their identity (7d) as “Malala” did by using a pseudonym *Gul Makai* in her controversial blog writing.

Being “broken inside” Malala needs support and strength from others. She is only a voice, a vision, a dream, a hope and an inspiration for others to stand up for their rights. To compensate for their tender age and feminine fragility, she believes and advocates that all girls like her need to be **“smarter”** (24), **“clever”** (29) and vocal. Malala’s spiritual and psychological forbearance is a positive character trait highlighted in the song that made her withstand the oppression she has to face. It is basically this resilience on her part, being too much for her age and gender that she has been portrayed as an icon for young girls globally.

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APPENDIX A

Lyrics of the Song “I am Malala”

look, i wanna make a nation proud
one day we'll say things loud and be free
with the power of our speech
we can change our world and how it's perceived
we've got doubts and beliefs
but not one thing's truly out of our reach
don't tell me the sky's the limit
cause nothing can pull me down when I dream
I'm working on turning 'em into a reality and opening eyes
and sharing a vision with every person
who had chose to be blind
i wanna focus their minds
to show that despite we're broken inside
we can stand powerful together without a cloak or disguise
i hope in the future that I can look back
on a new generation that's peaceful
that's grateful they're equal
cause those before made a change for the people
with paints and an easel we picture perfect
drew our attention to making the most of our time
creating more than useless inventions
i'm only young so I guess it's down for you to decide
would you choose to fight for what you believe in
would you do what is right if I needed you
would you stand tall with me right here by my side
be the change you want to see, take a look through my eyes
I am Malala
I am infinite hope
I am Malala, I am, I am, I am
I am Malala
I am infinite hope
I am Malala, I am, I am, I am
I am Malala
they say the harder the culture, they say the harder the girl
i say the smarter the girl, then the stronger our world
from a country where we made fortunes
of others misfortunes and betray our own people
then we mourn for a portion of time
always taught to fight for my rights
Malala fought for education then she fought for her life
it's hard to strive to be better

when oppressed by the suppressors
 treated like the lesser, just be clever
 ignore the ignorance from the ignorant
 society is ridiculous but it's the world that we living in
 chauffeurs our drive and denies our desire
 being silent doesn't help, it adds fuel to the fire
 how can somebody young like me even find any truth
 when nobody's looking for truth in the youth
 life isn't a choice, so who are we to say what's void
 and Malala gave a voice to me cuz...
 (repeat chorus)
 hard work and talent equals infinite growth
 in school a child and a teacher equals infinite hope

APPENDIX B

Clause listing of the song "I Am Malala"

- 1a. Look,
- 1b. I wanna make a nation proud,
- 2a. one day we'll say things loud
- 2b. and be free
- 3a. with the power of our speech we can change our world
- 3b. and how it's perceived
- 4a. we've got doubts and beliefs
- 4b. but not one thing's truly out of our reach
- 5a. don't tell me the sky's the limit
- 5b. cause nothing can pull me down
- 5c. when I dream
- 6a. I'm working on turning 'em into a reality
- 6b. and opening eyes
- 6c. and sharing a vision with every person
- 6d. who had chosen to be blind
- 7a. I wanna focus their minds
- 7b. to show
- 7c. that despite we're broken inside
- 7d. we can stand powerful together without a cloak or disguise
- 8a. I hope in the future
- 8b. that I can look back on a new generation
- 8c. that's peaceful
- 8d. that's grateful
- 9a. they're equal
- 9b. cause those before made a change for the people
- 10a. with paints and an easel we picture perfect
- 10b. drew our attention to making the most of our time creating more than useless inventions

- 11a. I'm only young
- 11b. so I guess
- 11c. it's down for you to decide
- 12. would you choose to fight for what you believe in
- 13. would you do what is right
- 14a. if I needed you
- 14b. would you stand tall with me right here by my side
- 15a. be the change you want to see,
- 15b. take a look through my eyes
- 16. I am Malala
- 17. I am infinite hope
- 18. I am Malala,
- 19. I am, I am, I am I am Malala
- 20. I am infinite hope
- 21. I am Malala,
- 22. I am, I am, I am I am Malala
- 23a. They say the harder the culture,
- 23b. they say the harder the girl
- 24. I say the smarter the girl, then the stronger our world
- 25a. from a country where we made fortunes of others' misfortunes
- 25b. and betray our own people
- 25c. then we mourn for a portion of time
- 26. always taught to fight for my rights
- 27a. Malala fought for education
- 27b. then she fought for her life
- 28a. it's hard to strive to be better
- 28b. when oppressed by the suppressors
- 28c. treated like the lesser,
- 29. just be clever
- 30a. ignore the ignorance from the ignorant society is ridiculous
- 30b. but it's the world
- 30c. that we're living in
- 30d. chauffeurs our drive
- 30e. and denies our desire
- 31a. being silent doesn't help,
- 31b. it adds fuel to the fire
- 32a. how can somebody young like me even find any truth
- 32b. when nobody's looking for truth
- 33a. in the youth life isn't a choice,
- 33b. so who are we to say what's void
- 33c. and Malala gave a voice to me cuz...
- 33d. hard work and talent equals infinite growth
- 33e. in school a child and a teacher equals infinite hope...

APPENDIX C

Participants and Process types in the song “I am Malala”

<i>Clause #</i>	<i>Participant</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Process Type</i>
1a.		Look	Behavioural
1b.	I	wanna make ... proud	Mental
2a.	we	'll say	Verbal
2b.	(we)	(will) be	Relational
3a.	we	can change	Material
3b.	it	's perceived	Mental
4a.	we	've got doubts and beliefs	Mental
4b.	one thing	's ... not	Relational
5a.	(you)	don't tell	Verbal
5b.	nothing	can pull...down	Material
5c.	I	dream	Mental
6a.	I	'm working on	Material
6b.	(I)	('m working on)	Material
6c.	(I)	('m working on)	Material
6d.	(every person) who	had chosen	Material
7a.	I	wanna focus	Mental
7b.	(I)	(want) to show	Verbal
7c.	we	're	Relational
7d.	we	can stand powerful	Material
8a.	I	hope	Mental
8b.	I	can look back	Mental
8c.	that	's	Relational
8d.	that	's	Relational
9a.	they	're	Relational
9b.	those before	made a change	Material
10a.	we	picture	Material
10b.		drew our attention	Mental
11a.	I	'm	Relational
11b.	I	guess	Mental
11c.	it	's	Relational
12.	you	would ... choose to fight	Material
13.	you	would ... do	Material
14a.	I	needed	Relational
14b.	you	would stand tall	Material
15a.	(you)	be the change	Relational
15b.	you	want to see	Behavioural
15c.	(you)	take a look	Behavioural
16.	I	am	Relational
17.	I	am	Relational

<i>Clause #</i>	<i>Participant</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Process Type</i>
18.	I	am	Relational
19.	I	am	Relational
20.	I	am	Relational
21.	I	am	Relational
22.	I	am	Relational
23a.	They	say	Verbal
23b.	they	say	Verbal
24.	I	say	Verbal
25a.	we	made fortunes	Material
25b.	(we)	betray	Material
25c.	we	mourn	Mental
26.	(I)	(‘m) ... taught to fight	Verbal
27a.	Malala	fought for education	Material
27b.	she	fought for her life	Material
28a.	it	’s	Relational
28b.	(we)	(are) oppressed	Material
28c.	(we)	(are) treated	Material
29.	(you)	be clever	Relational
30a.	ignore the ignorance from the ignorant society	is	Relational
30b.	it	’s	Existential
30c.	we	’re living in	Material
30d.	(the world)	chauffeurs our drive	Mental
30e.	(the world)	denies our desire	Material
31a.	being silent	doesn’t help	Relational
31b.	it	adds fuel to the fire	Material
32a.	somebody young like me	can ... even find any truth	Material
32b.	nobody	’s looking for truth	Material
33a.	life	isn’t	Relational
33b.	we	to say	Verbal
33c.	Malala	gave a voice	Behavioural
33d.	hard work and talent	equals	Relational
33e.	a child and a teacher	equals	Relational