

# A Transitivity Analysis of the British Queen's Parliament Speech

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the parliament speech delivered by the British queen under the framework of transitivity through the employment of qualitative and quantitative methods. The function and distribution of the transitivity process in the speech are explored, aiming at revealing the linguistic feature of the speech so that the understanding of the linguistic characteristics and the speech content is deepened. The study finds out four process types in the speech, among which the material process accounts for the largest proportion, with the relational process, the mental process and the existential process followed. There is no verbal and behavioral process in the speech. The material process shows the vigorous actions of the government. The relational process makes the power of the government closely connected with the country and the citizens, and the mental process implies the government's outlook on the future and the confidence to do all the work well. This linguistic pattern shows the seriousness and authority of the speaker and the study concludes that the specific linguistic structure determines the implied meaning of the utterance.

**Keywords:** Queen's parliament speech, Transitivity, Process type.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

Transitivity is first proposed by Halliday (2004) who claims that our most powerful conception of reality consists of goings-on, doing, happening, feeling, being and becoming. This theory has been widely employed in literature and news text. In 1971, Halliday first used this theory in analyzing William Golding's novel *The Inheritors*. Following him, a lot of studies in this field began to flourish such as Michael Short's (1972) analysis of *Mice and Men*, Paul Simpson's (1997) analysis of *Pincher Martin*, etc. In China, many scholars have also contributed to the understanding of practical and literary discourse from the perspective of transitivity analysis. Research on the mass media discourse such as advertisement discourse analyzed by Huang Guowen (2001), and on critical discourse like English news scripts by Xin Bin (2005) all manifest that studies under transitivity framework are effective and convincing in discourse analysis. As one of the most influential theories, transitivity analysis provides an experiential meaning of the discourse. Fairclough (1995) holds that choosing which processes of transitivity to describe the course of event implies cultural, political or ideological significance. Thus, more research on political speech is significant because it can reflect the ideological and political message.

As the highest legislature, the parliament of the United Kingdom is the center stage of British politics. The queen's parliament speech is a very important speech once a year. It is what the queen spoke at the opening ceremony of the British Parliament, which is the heritage of the British Monarchy speech and is politically representative. It is necessary to pay more heed to the parliament speech each year since Great Britain is one part of the world and the development of the country will contribute to the progress of the whole world.

By using qualitative and quantitative method, this study selected Her Majesty's Most Gracious Speech to both House of Parliament in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021 as the research material from China Daily with a total of 7229 words and 530 clauses, each of which carries a kind of transitivity process. Since the issue of Brexit, the parliament speech is cancelled in the year of 2018. Thus the year of 2018 isn't chosen. Every clause will be labeled and analyzed in terms of transitivity structure, the frequency of each process type carried by the clause is counted and the percentage of the process types is calculated by IBM SPSS Statistics 25.0, which aims at answering the following two questions: First, what types of process dominate the parliament speech in terms of transitivity

structure? Second, why does the parliament speech have such a process-type distribution?

Through transitivity analysis, this study hopes to reveal the language characteristics of the speech in order to deepen the understanding of such kind of speech pattern and its characteristics, which is conducive to a deeper understanding of the content when coming across similar speeches. Meanwhile, the political views can be revealed clearly, and the ideology can be better understood by people all over the world. Therefore, it is a need for a better comprehension of the speech content under the guidance of transitivity theory.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework of this Study

#### 2.1.1 Systemic Functional Grammar

Systemic Functional Grammar is put forward by Halliday. According to Halliday (2004), it is a theory of the choice of meaning. It consists of two parts. One is systemic grammar. The other is functional grammar, which shows that language is a tool for social communication.

Halliday (2004) categorized three metafunctions in language structure, that is, ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. The interpersonal function implies that people use language to build and maintain social relationships, and to express their view towards the world. The textual function refers to information organized by humans. The ideational function indicates that people use language to express their experience of the world both external and internal, and to describe events and entities around them.

#### 2.1.2 Transitivity in Systemic Functional Grammar

As a part of ideational function, transitivity is a system of experiential meaning that can express both physical world and the spiritual world. Halliday (2004) proposes that the ideational function is achieved through the transitivity system during the process of describing the experiential world, and clause becomes the central role for embodying the general principle that reality is made up of processes. Thompson (2014) also claims that transitivity is a system which not only focuses on verbs, but also on the whole clause. Thus, every clause represents a kind of process.

The processes fall into six types: material process, mental process, relational process, verbal process, existential process and behavioral process. Material process is an act of doing something. It expresses the notion that one entity has already done something and can do something with other entities. Mental process is the process of sensation, reflection and perception. It usually involves at least one human participant. Relational process is the process of being. It

contains two sub-categories: the attributive and the identifying. Verbal process is the process of saying, which is the transfer of messages through language. Behavioral process is the process of physiological and psychological behavior. There is only one participant: the human which is called the Behaver. The existential process is the process of the existence or occurrence of something.

### 2.2 Previous Studies of Transitivity Analysis of Political Speech

In terms of the application of this theory in speech studies, scholars at home and abroad did some research on political speech.

Manzano and Orquijo (2020) studies the transitivity processes in the inaugural speeches of Filipino presidents from 1899 to 2016 under the guidance of Halliday's transitivity system model. They purposed that transitivity processes play a distinct role in the inaugural speeches of Filipino presidents in persuading and informing the public as regards their ideologies and commitments. Ihsan Ali *et al.*, (2021) analyze the discourse of Nelson Mandela's political speeches. Their study proved that the effectiveness of political discourse is based on Systemic Functional Grammar, particularly the idealization meta-functions.

In China, Zhao and Zhang (2017) selected the inaugural address delivered by Donald Trump in 2017 through the application of transitivity model. They employed qualitative and quantitative methods to explore diverse functions of the six process types. They also revealed the president's real purpose of delivering this speech. Zhang (2017) studied the Hillary Clinton's and Donald Trump's first television debate under the framework of transitivity with the use of quantitative method in order to discover the distribution of each process and the reason of the distribution. Zhao and Li (2018) did research on David Cameron's Speech in retaining Scotland under the framework of transitivity. Same methods are employed to explore the distribution and functions of the process types that occurred in the speech. Their research aims at knowing more about the history of the UK. Meanwhile, people can also learn how to carry out a successful speech.

### 2.3 Previous Studies of Queen's Speech

The queen Elizabeth is the symbol of unity in the heart of the British people. There are some researches on the queen's speech under various theoretical frameworks.

Wu and Mao (2022) conduct a critical discourse analysis of the Queen's 2021 Christmas Speech. By analyzing the use of transitivity and modality in the discourse, it explores and interprets the relationship between the language of political speeches and the ideology behind it. Jiang (2018) used transitivity analysis to probe into the queen's Christmas

broadcast in 2017. Qualitative method is used to analyze the six transitivity processes that appeared in the speech in order to explore the effect of the process on the realization of the purpose of the speech. What's more, this research confirms that transitivity theory provides the feasibility of analyzing speech discourse from the perspective of linguistics. Luo (2020) analyzed the queen's speech on covid-19 from the perspective of transitivity, discussing the economic, political and cultural characteristics of the UK's response by using qualitative and quantitative method. It finally found out the queen's aim of delivering such speech. His study helps enrich the research under the framework of transitivity.

To sum up, transitivity analysis of political speech above helps deepen the understanding of the discourse, and provides new perspectives of understanding of the choice of linguistic forms and the function of a particular kind of discourse. However, previous studies from the perspective of transitivity mainly focus on the presidential speeches and the queen's Christmas broadcasts. There exist fewer studies in the queen's parliament speech. The analysis of parliament speech can help people better understand the British policy and its development. Therefore, this study selects the parliament speech to analyze under the framework of transitivity.

### 3. Transitivity Analysis of the Queen's Parliament Speech

#### 3.1 Types of Clauses in Queen's Speech in terms of Transitivity

##### 3.1.1 Material Process of the Queen's Parliament Speech

Material process refers to the process of doing in which the speaker's intention is presented to make the listeners react. In these seven speeches, most of the material process is to describe the actions or measures implemented by the government.

- (a) The bill will enhance the United Kingdom's energy independence and security by opening up... (2014).
- (b) They will continue the work of bringing the public finances under control and reducing the deficit, so Britain lives within its means. (2015).
- (c) ...environmental principles will be enshrined in law. Measures will be introduced to improve air and water quality, tackle plastic pollution and restore habitats so plants and wildlife can thrive... (2019).
- (d) New legislation will modernize the law on communications data, improve the law on policing and criminal justice, and ban the new generation of psychoactive drugs. (2020).

The clause (a) is about the problem of energy. It tells of the actions of the government in order to strengthen the energy independence and security.

"Enhance" means to improve or to make something better. It here indicates the functions of the bill introduced by the government. And the circumstance of the clause shows the way to strengthen this kind of problem. The clause (b) is about financial problems. The verb "continue" means to maintain or keep a certain condition. It is an extension of action. Here, it refers to the continuation of bringing public finance under control and reducing the deficit. The fiscal deficit is a manifestation that the fiscal revenue and expenditure fail to be balanced. The verb phrase "lives within its means" indicates that the country can make ends meet. The decrease of the deficit can make a balance between incomes and outgoings. It shows that the government has been engaged in this affair for a long time.

In the clause (c), environmental measures are talked about. The verb "enshrine" means to make something official, especially by putting it into an essential written law or other documents. It indicates that the government is beginning to pay more and more heed to environmental issues. The word "introduce" means to make something available for use, discussion, etc. for the first time. This word connects "enshrine" and "thrive" together to make the contents of the law more specific. And the last verb "thrive" refers to lives that are growing up stronger. It not only reflects the tenacious vitality of the creature, but also gives people a feeling of vitality. Meanwhile, it also gives people a feeling of hope. The clause (d) is about the national law. The verb "modernize" means to make a system more suitable for use at the present time. The information nowadays spreads very quickly and the use of this verb indicates that personal privacy can be well protected by government's law. The word "improve" means to let something become more complete or better and "ban" means to decide or say officially that something is not allowed. These two verbs indicate the further crackdown on crime and control of the harmful drugs.

##### 3.1.2 Mental Process of the Queen's Parliament Speech

Mental process refers to the process of cognition, perception and reaction. The clauses that consist of mental process are selected from these speeches:

- (a) Prince Philip and I look forward to welcoming... on a state visit... (2016).
- (b) My Government intends to work towards a new partnership... (2019).
- (c) My Ministers will ... ensure every child has a high-quality education and is able to fulfill their potential (2021).

The clause (a) used the verb phrase "look forward to", which indicates a positive emotion. It expressed the queen's welcome towards those countries that will come here and the expectation towards those

countries that they will pay a visit to. It strongly expresses the will of establishing, maintaining and enhancing a better cooperation and relationship with countries all over the world. In clause (b), the word “intend” is the symbol of the mental process. “Intend” means that something has been planned or decided to continue to do. In this clause, it shows what the plan will be after leaving the European Union. Normally, there is usually one participant that is human. However, something endowed with consciousness can also have this property.

The clause (c) uses the verb “ensure”. This verb means to make sure that something happens or is definite. Children’s education is very essential because they are the future of one country. However, the outbreak of the pandemic has posed a threat to the quality of education. The use of ensure indicates that the government will spare every effort to make sure the education quality and has confidence in national education policy.

### 3.1.3 Relational Process of the Queen’s Parliament Speech

Relational process is the process of being. According to Halliday (2004), the systematic construction of relational process in English operates with three main types: intensive (x is a), circumstantial (x is at a) and possessive (x has a) type and two modes: attributive (a is an attribute of x) and identifying (a is the identity of x) mode. In the queen’s parliament speech, relational process is largely used in the theme of security problem and education and technology.

- (a) A priority will be to build a more united country... (2017).
- (b) ...that the United Kingdom is at the forefront of technology for ... (2016).

The functions of relational process can be interpreted as showing something that attributes to others or symbolizes others in order to make the identity clear.

The use of “be” establishes the connection between the participants that are before and after the process in the clause. The clause (a) is an intensive clause in the identifying mode. The identifier elaborates on what the priority is. It claims that the primary task is to make the country more unified. It is acknowledged that Scotland had a referendum to leave the UK in 2014, which is the idea the Scottish people still have

until now. The foremost reason is about the economy because the British government has done little to ensure that the Scottish economy is sustainable. Therefore, strengthening the relationship between regions of the UK from the perspective of the economy is a must.

Clause (b) is about technology is circumstantial clause in attributive mode. It implies that the country will play a predominance function in the field of transportation. The development of technology is one of the elements to evaluate whether a country is well built or not. It can also benefit people and make life more convenient, which reflects the consideration from the side of their citizens.

### 3.1.4 Existential Process of the Queen’s Parliament Speech

The existential process represents the process of existence or occurrence, which can be the problem that exists in some situation, the chance that appears in a certain event and something that will come into existence, etc.

- (a) There will also be a fairer balance between schools, through the National Funding Formula (2016).
- (b) ... seizing the opportunities that arise from leaving the European Union (2019).

In clause (a), existential process is identified because of the use of the dummy subject “there” with the verb “be” as the marker. The existential process has only one participant that is existent. Thus, the existent of the clause (a) is “a fairer balance between...” Clause (a) is about education. In the year of 2016, Great Britain published *Educational Excellence Everywhere* white paper, aiming at enabling students from all regions and backgrounds to reach their full potential through a good education. The circumstance “through the National Funding Formula” tells people the way the government used in order to realize fair school education resources.

The clause (b) is about the political decision. Brexit is the biggest political decision made in the UK for a long time. The existence is opportunities. The verb “arise” means “to start to exist”. And as the circumstance, “leaving the European Union” shows from which the opportunities have come. Opportunity is an objective existence and here by using existential process, it places more emphasis on the importance of seizing the opportunity after leaving the European Union.

#### 4. Distributional Analysis of Different Types of Clause in the Queen's Speech

##### 4.1 Distribution of Transitivity Processes of the Queen's Speech

Table 1

Process type		Material	Mental	Relational	Existential	Verbal	Behavioral	Total
Year								
2014	Frequency	76	3	2	0	0	0	81
	Percentage (%)	93.8	3.7	2.5	0	0	0	100
2015	Frequency	61	4	3	1	0	0	69
	Percentage (%)	88.4	5.8	4.3	1.5	0	0	100
2016	Frequency	58	5	5	1	0	0	69
	Percentage (%)	84.1	7.2	7.2	1.5	0	0	100
2017	Frequency	65	9	12	0	0	0	86
	Percentage (%)	75.5	10.5	14.0	0	0	0	100
2019	Frequency	69	10	12	1	0	0	92
	Percentage (%)	75.0	10.9	13.0	1.1	0	0	100
2020	Frequency	53	6	2	1	0	0	62
	Percentage (%)	85.5	9.7	3.2	1.6	0	0	100
2021	Frequency	60	5	6	0	0	0	71
	Percentage (%)	84.5	7.0	8.5	0	0	0	100
Total	Frequency	442	42	42	4	0	0	530
	Percentage (%)	83.4	7.9	7.9	0.8	0	0	100

As it is shown in the above table, there are four transitivity processes that occurred in this speech. The percentage of material process takes up the largest with a total of 83.4 percent. It is followed by relational process and mental process with the percentage of 7.9. The existential process occurred with a very small proportion. It emerged in 2015, 2016, 2019 and 2020. Verbal process and behavioral process didn't appear among these speeches.

#### 4.2 DISCUSSION

As the process of doing or happening, material process reflects what one has done to another entity and what has taken place in a certain moment. In these speeches, the queen showed citizens and people in the world what the country wanted to do and what their action would be with the large use of the material process. Strengthening the economic construction, improving people's livelihood, and maintaining social security and steadiness, these are the chief issues that most people take heed of. The policies that will be implemented and the law that will be enacted both have one aim, that is, to let people live a better life and gain more happiness. The large amount use of material process also indicates that the British government puts more emphasis on their action. The queen is the supreme head of the government, and what the queen says needs to be credible. The use of material process allows the queen to give a sense of power to all British citizens and people in the whole world. It also manifests that the queen is full of passion, confidence and vigor. It is acknowledged that action is louder than spoken words. And work is carried out successively. For example, the Great Repeal Bill which was promulgated in 2017 has been one of the most significant acts in British history. It paves the way for Great Britain to

eventually leave the European Union and to take back sovereignty over parliamentary legislation. And the adjustment tax policy announced in 2016 includes lowering the corporate income tax rate, raising the standard of minimum wage, and other contents aiming at providing support for the country's stock market. The enactment of bills and the implementation of policies all manifest the government's strong force of action. With a large proportion of the material process, it shows the whole world that the overall power of the country is very strong.

There are totally 42 relational processes identified in these speeches. Relational process is employed to elucidate the relationship between two participants. Among these speeches, relational process can also be a choice to refer to situations in different times, like the country's status and its strength, which link with the country itself tightly and to make clear the view of the British government.

The proportion of mental process is the same as relational process. Unlike material process, mental process refers to the inner sense. It is mainly used to express the hope for establishing and maintaining a better relationship with other unions and countries like the United States, Spain, Singapore, China, etc. The use of mental process also indicates the confidence to do a great job in the aspect of social security, people's health and education.

There are no verbal process and behavioral process in these speeches. Since the verbal process is to say something and the behavioral process is the description of the physiological actions, they are not quite common in speeches. What's more, the parliament

speech is a kind of political speech that is about the measures, actions and bills implemented, which contains sentences that are declarative in nature. Therefore, it is understandable that these two types of process haven't appeared in the speeches.

Through the vertical comparison of the figures in the above tables, it is noticeable that in the speeches from 2014 to 2019, there is a decrement of the proportion of material processes, while there is an increment of the proportion of mental processes and relational processes. From 2020 to 2021, the amount of material process has a tendency to decrease though it is higher than that of 2019 and at the same time, the percentage of mental process becomes lower and relational process becomes a little higher.

The aspects expressed by mental process have expanded gradually from international relationship to national and global security, military, education, health, economy and technology in the speech from 2014 to 2019. The increase in mental process implies that the nation has become more and more powerful, and that the confidence to ensure the wellbeing and security of all the people and to improve international relationships and global affairs is increasing. Meanwhile, topics described by relational process have also expanded gradually from economy to national unity, security issue, ecological issues and education. In the speech from 2014 to 2017 and 2019, aspects on education, ecological issues, national unity and security all increased from zero, which shows that more problems have appeared with the development of the country. It also manifests that the government puts more emphasis on these above aspects. The phenomenon that there is an increase of material process from 2019 to 2020 implies the strong confidence of the government. The total tendency of reduction of material process indicates that there's not only the description of the plans and laws but also the infusion of emotion in the speech, which makes the speech more vivid. Although there was a little bit of emotional input, the speech was generally serious and formal.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Major Findings

The queen's parliament speech belongs to political speech, in which domestic affairs, foreign relations, major international and domestic events and practical problems are described and discussed by the speaker. From the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the recent seven years' parliament speech, four out of the six types of process have been discovered and the feature of the parliament speech is obvious. It not only shows the seriousness and authoritativeness of the speaker but also involves some emotions in the speech. This analysis helps people have an improved comprehension of the development of the UK. It also indicates that the choice of linguistic signs is determined by the different genre of the discourse. And

such kind of analysis helps understand the relationship between the choice of language type and the function of a particular type of discourse.

### 5.2 Limitations

Although this study did a detailed analysis of the recent seven years' parliament speech under the framework of transitivity, it still has some limitations.

First of all, this study only selected recent seven years' speeches to do research. It is not sufficient. It can also be compared with similar speeches delivered by others and more corpora can be selected to conduct more convincing research. Secondly, the study only analyzed the process type that appeared in the speeches. The participants and circumstances in the speech haven't been analyzed yet. Lastly, one of the three meta-functions to do this research is only employed. It can be better if using interpersonal function and textual function to study this corpus.

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