

Analysis of Hamlet's Soliloquies from an Ideational Functional Perspective

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Abstract

This article analyzes the famous soliloquies in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* through the concept of ideational function in Halliday's systemic functional grammar theory. The focus is on how this theory reveals the deep structure of the text and the complex psychology of the characters, particularly through six processes of ideational function. The analysis demonstrates that these processes not only enhance the understanding of Hamlet's inner conflicts but also highlight the philosophical reflections embedded in the text. The article emphasizes that while systemic functional grammar theory provides rich perspectives and profound insights for literary text analysis. Overall, this theory offers a structured analytical framework for understanding *Hamlet* and deepens the appreciation of this classic text.

Keywords: Ideational Function, Functional Grammar, Halliday, *Hamlet*, Soliloquy, Mental Processes.**Copyright © 2024 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the ideational function proposed by M.A.K. Halliday is the level of language used to express experience, logical relations, and temporal sequences. It involves three main types of process: material, mental, and relational processes. Additionally, there are existential, verbal, and behavioral processes, collectively shaping the ways language expresses experience and the real world.

Hamlet's famous soliloquy "To be, or not to be? That is the question—" is a classic case in literary analysis, profoundly revealing the character's inner world and contemplation of the meaning of life. In this soliloquy, Prince Hamlet explores the nature of human suffering, the unknown of death, and the conflict between action and hesitation through a series of reflections. These musings are expressed through different verbal processes, forming a complex psychological landscape.

This article aims to analyze this soliloquy in *Hamlet* using Halliday's ideational function and the six process types. Through this analysis, it can not only deepen researchers' understanding of Hamlet's psychological state but also appreciate how Shakespeare skillfully uses language to depict the character's inner

world. This analysis will reveal the distribution and use of different process types in the soliloquy and how they collectively contribute to expressing Hamlet's philosophical reflections and emotional experiences.

By delving into these processes in detail, it aims to demonstrate how systemic functional linguistics serves as a powerful tool in understanding the deeper meanings in literary works. Furthermore, this analysis will highlight Shakespeare's linguistic artistry in expressing complex human emotions and thoughts, as well as the significant position of *Hamlet* in literary history.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), developed by Halliday, is a theoretical framework for analyzing and understanding the structure and function of language. The ideational function, a core component of SFG, focuses on how language expresses experience, logical relationships, and temporal sequences, that is, how it constructs cognitive models of the real and mental worlds. Holting (2013) mentioned that SFL provides a holistic model of language, aimed at systematically describing the linguistic resources of a given language. Omer & Ali (2021) claimed that the main patterns adopted by the Ideational function include literal equivalence, contextual equivalence, shift in Process,

and shift in Circumstance. Matthiessen & Halliday (2009) mentioned that unlike traditional grammar, SFG approaches grammar from the perspective of resources rather than rules, aiming to display the overall system of grammar rather than fragments. Sameer & Al Dilaimy (2020) claims that transitivity analysis includes material processes, mental processes, relational processes, behavioral processes, verbal processes, and existential processes, while modality analysis includes modal verbs, tense, and personal pronouns. Different modal auxiliaries (such as can, may, must, ought to, shall, will) serve different functions when expressing the speaker's commitment to the propositional content in terms of probability or possibility, or in terms of obligation and permission. (Verstraete, 2001) The interpersonal function uses discourse to show the close connection between people and society. It also determines all the processes by which the speaker tries to enter the speech situation to display speech acts. Whether it is poetry or transactional text, valuable written communication is clear and purposeful, displaying qualities of conceptual clarity and contextual urgency. (Couture, 1986) The textual function meets the requirement for the text to be related to the real situational context, having a complete text structure. In SFG, the ideational function is realized through six processes, which describe different semantic roles and actions in language:

Material Process: Involves material actions or events, such as “do”, “run”, “occur”.

Mental Process: Involves mental activities, such as thinking, feeling, perceiving, etc., such as “think,” “want,” “see.”

Verbal Process: Involves communicative actions, that is, communication between the speaker and others, such as “tell”, “ask”, “promise”.

Relational Process: Involves static relationships between things, such as ownership, attributes, or identity, such as “be”, “have”, “like.”

Existential Process: Involves states of being or non-being, such as “exist”, “lack.”

Behavioral Process: Involves the behavioral expression of living beings, such as “laugh”, “cry”, “feel.”

These process types allow researchers to understand how language expresses different types of meaning and how they are concretely realized at the lexical-grammatical level of language. SFG emphasizes the social function of language, considering it not just a tool for conveying information but also an integral part of social interaction and cultural practice. Halliday's theory attempts to connect linguistics with fields such as sociology, psychology, and education to provide a more comprehensive model of human communication.

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's classic tragic works, and Hamlet's monologues are among the most famous and profound parts of the play. Hamlet's monologues mainly express his inner contradictions, struggles, and thoughts, as well as his profound contemplation of life, morality, and existence.

The most famous monologues include “To be, or not to be, that is the question,” “To do or not to do, that is the question,” “What a beautiful and absurd world this is,” “Whether I should be or not be, that is the question,” and so on. These monologues show Hamlet's thinking about his own situation and responsibilities, as well as his profound contemplation of themes such as life and death, truth and falsehood, love and betrayal.

Hamlet's monologues not only show his wisdom and ability to think independently but also reveal his inner pain and confusion. These monologues have made Hamlet a character that has attracted much attention and discussion, and have made *Hamlet* an eternal classic. Xiao (2021) believes that Hamlet's revenge is a superficial plot, which deeply displays Hamlet's character traits and his wisdom. Gao (2012) conducts an in-depth discussion of Hamlet's famous monologues from a textual analysis perspective, aiming to reveal the connotations and meanings behind the monologues. The article explores the role of the monologues in the overall context and their importance for understanding the character of Hamlet and the entire drama. Zhang (2016) comparatively analyzes four Chinese translations of a monologue in *Hamlet* from the perspectives of prosody, sociolinguistics, rhetoric, stylistics, and annotation, which not only reflects the important literary value of Hamlet but also the significance of the monologue. Hirsh (2010) Shakespeare designed the “To be, or not to be” speech to make the experienced theater audience of his time believe it was a feigned monologue. Hamlet feigns to speak to himself but actually intends to convey the speech itself or the account of the speech to Claudius's ears, in order to mislead his enemy about his mental state. That is, Hamlet's speech sincerely expresses his thoughts. In summary, Hamlet's classic monologues have strong literary and analyzability.

3. Text Analysis

When analyzing the classic soliloquy in *Hamlet*, using Halliday's systemic functional linguistics theory can delve into multiple aspects of the text. Language serves to convey ideas (Evans, 2016). This chapter will conduct a deep analysis of the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy in *Hamlet* through Halliday's ideational function theory. This soliloquy is one of the most famous passages in Shakespeare's works, revealing not only Hamlet's inner conflicts but also reflecting on the philosophical contemplation of human existence. Through the above analysis, this chapter aims to demonstrate how the theoretical tools of systemic functional linguistics can be used to interpret literary

works, especially in analyzing complex texts, this approach can reveal the underlying structure and meaning of the text.

1. To be, or not to be? That is the question—
 - Process: Mental Process (thinking)
 - Senser: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Phenomenon: The dilemma of existence
2. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 - Process: Mental Process (contemplating)
 - Senser: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Phenomenon: The suffering in the mind
3. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
 - Process: Material Process (experiencing)
 - Actor: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Process: Suffer
 - Goal: The slings and arrows (metaphors for adversities)
4. Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
 - Process: Material Process (action)
 - Actor: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Process: Take arms
 - Goal: Against a sea of troubles
5. And, by opposing, end them?
 - Process: Material Process (resistance)
 - Actor: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Process: Oppose
 - Goal: The troubles
6. To die, to sleep—
 - Process: Existential Process (state of being)
 - Existent: Death
 - Circumstance: To sleep (as a state of non-existence)
7. No more—and by a sleep to say we end
 - Process: Relational Process (attributive)
 - Carrier: The state of being
 - Attribute: To end through sleep
8. The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
 - Process: Mental Process (experiencing)
 - Senser: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Phenomenon: Heartache and natural shocks
9. That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation
 - Process: Relational Process (identifying)
 - Token: The flesh
 - Value: Heir to the heartache and shocks
10. Devoutly to be wished!
 - Process: Mental Process (desiring)
 - Senser: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Phenomenon: The consummation to be devoutly wished
11. To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub,
 - Process: Existential Process (state of being)
 - Existent: The possibility of dreaming in sleep
12. For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 - Process: Mental Process (anticipation)
 - Senser: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Phenomenon: The dreams that may come in death
13. When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 - Process: Material Process (action)
 - Actor: We (implied to be humans or the speaker)
 - Process: Shuffle off
 - Goal: This mortal coil (life's troubles)
14. Must give us pause.
 - Process: Mental Process (reflection)
 - Senser: Us (implied to be humans or the speaker)
 - Phenomenon: The consideration of death
15. There's the respect
 - Process: Relational Process (attributive)
 - Carrier: The situation of long life
 - Attribute: The respect (importance) that makes it a calamity
16. That makes calamity of so long life.
 - Process: Relational Process (attributive)
 - Carrier: Long life
 - Attribute: Calamity
17. For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
 - Process: Mental Process (questioning)
 - Senser: Who (anyone)
 - Phenomenon: The willingness to bear life's hardships
18. Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
 - Process: Material Process (enduring)
 - Actor: The oppressed
 - Process: Bear
 - Goal: The wrongs and contumely
19. The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
 - Process: Material Process (enduring)
 - Actor: The one experiencing love and legal issues
 - Process: Bear
 - Goal: The pangs of love and the law's delay
20. The insolence of office, and the spurns
 - Process: Material Process (enduring)
 - Actor: The one experiencing the disrespect
 - Process: Bear

- Goal: The insolence and spurns
21. That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
- Process: Relational Process (identifying)
 - Token: Patient merit
 - Value: The unworthy
22. When he himself might his quietus make
- Process: Material Process (action)
 - Actor: He (the person)
 - Process: Make
 - Goal: His quietus (end)
23. With a bare bodkin?
- Process: Material Process (action)
 - Actor: He (the person)
 - Process: Use
 - Goal: A bare bodkin (dagger)
24. Who would fardels bear,
- Process: Mental Process (questioning)
 - Senser: Who (anyone)
 - Phenomenon: The willingness to bear burdens (fardels)
25. To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
- Process: Behavioural Process (behaving)
 - Behavior: The one living the life
 - Behaviour: Grunting and sweating
26. But that the dread of something after death,
- Process: Mental Process (fearing)
 - Senser: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Phenomenon: The dread of what comes after death
27. The undiscovered country from whose bourn
- Process: Relational Process (attributive)
 - Carrier: The country (death)
 - Attribute: Undiscovered
28. No traveler returns, puzzles the will
- Process: Mental Process (perplexing)
 - Senser: The will (of the person)
 - Phenomenon: The fact that no traveler returns from death
29. And makes us rather bear those ills we have
- Process: Mental Process (persuading)
 - Senser: The dread
 - Phenomenon: The preference to bear known ills
30. Than fly to others that we know not of?
- Process: Mental Process (contemplating)
 - Senser: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Phenomenon: The choice between known suffering and the unknown
31. Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
- Process: Relational Process (attributive)
 - Carrier: Conscience
 - Attribute: Maker of cowards
32. And thus the native hue of resolution
- Process: Relational Process (attributive)
 - Carrier: The native hue of resolution
 - Attribute: Sicklied o'er
33. Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
- Process: Relational Process (attributive)
 - Carrier: The hue of resolution
 - Attribute: Pale cast of thought
34. And enterprises of great pitch and moment
- Process: Relational Process (attributive)
 - Carrier: Enterprises
 - Attribute: Of great pitch and moment
35. With this regard their currents turn awry,
- Process: Material Process (action)
 - Actor: Their currents (actions or endeavors)
 - Process: Turn awry (go wrong)
36. And lose the name of action.
- Process: Relational Process (attributive)
 - Carrier: Their actions
 - Attribute: Losing the name of action (no longer being considered action)
37. —Soft you now, The fair Ophelia!
- Process: Verbal Process (addressing)
 - Sayer: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Receiver: Ophelia
 - Verbal Process: The act of addressing
38. Be all my sins remembered.
- Process: Mental Process (wishing)
 - Senser: The speaker (Hamlet)
 - Phenomenon: The remembrance of his sins.
- Here are the occurrences of each process type:
- Material Process:** appeared 5 times (sentences 3, 13, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 35).
- Mental Process:** appeared 12 times (sentences 1, 2, 8, 10, 12, 14, 17, 26, 30, 31, 32, 38).
- Verbal Process:** appeared 1 time (sentence 37).
- Relational Process:** appeared 6 times (sentences 7, 9, 15, 16, 27, 33, 36).
- Existential Process:** appeared 3 times (sentences 6, 11, 28).
- Behavioural Process:** appeared 1 time (sentence 25).

Material Process	5	13.16%
Mental Process	12	31.58%
Verbal Process	1	2.63%
Relational Process	6	15.79%
Existential Process	3	7.89%
Behavioural Process	1	2.63%

4. FOUNDING

In this famous soliloquy in *Hamlet*, the most frequently used process type is Mental Processes. This is because the soliloquy is introspective in nature, involving Hamlet's profound thoughts and feelings on survival, death, fate, love, the struggles of time, the value of action, and personal conscience.

Mental Processes is the most frequently used. Throughout the soliloquy, Hamlet engages in thinking and feeling, reflected in his questions, rhetorical devices, and reflections on various concepts. For instance, he contemplates the value of existence, enduring the blows of fate, and what may occur after death. In this soliloquy, Prince Hamlet reflects on the meaning of existence and the consequences of death, vividly portraying his inner struggles and philosophical contemplation.

In this soliloquy, the frequency of Mental Processes usage is the highest. The ideational function in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) proposed by Halliday primarily involves how language expresses experiences, logical relationships, and temporal sequences, constructing the real world and the mental world. Hamlet's words represent his personal reflections, reflecting his inner world and psychological state. The soliloquy is filled with emotional expressions like "heartache," "despised love," which are manifestations of Mental Processes. Hamlet's contemplation, reasoning, and weighing of the pros and cons of life and death are all part of cognitive activities that constitute Mental Processes. The soliloquy involves profound reflections on life, death, consciousness, and the unknown, all significant components of Mental Processes. Hamlet's hesitation and struggles in deciding whether to act demonstrate complex psychological activities. Shakespeare employs rich metaphors, rhetorical questions, and literary devices in this soliloquy, enhancing the expressiveness of the language and emphasizing the expression of Mental Processes. Through this soliloquy, Shakespeare showcases Hamlet's intricate psychological activities, adding literary depth and complexity to the work. The frequent use of Mental Processes in this soliloquy not only reflects Hamlet's complex inner world but also demonstrates Shakespeare's profound understanding and superior skills in character portrayal.

Material Processes also occur frequently, often related to Hamlet's actions or considerations of actions. For example, he mentions taking action against adversity

("to take arms against a sea of troubles") and ending life ("end them").

Relational Processes appear frequently in Hamlet's soliloquy, primarily because they play a crucial role in expressing identity confirmation (Processes) and attribute assignment (Attributive). Relational Processes express the state of existence or identity through the use of the verb "be." In the soliloquy, Hamlet's contemplation is essentially an exploration of his own identity and meaning. Here, it is used to express Hamlet's state as an existing subject. Relational Processes are also used to describe or attribute specific qualities or attributes to someone or something. In the soliloquy, Hamlet uses a series of Relational Processes to express the attributes of suffering in life and his feelings and evaluations of this suffering. In Hamlet's soliloquy, the use of Relational Processes reveals how he explores and defines his relationship with the surrounding world through internal reflection. These processes not only help express Hamlet's psychological state but also serve as linguistic manifestations of his philosophical contemplation, allowing Hamlet to explore concepts of life, death, action, and suffering in a profound and reflective manner. Therefore, the frequent appearance of Relational Processes in this soliloquy emphasizes Hamlet's inner struggles and existentialist reflections, key elements in understanding the complexity of the entire soliloquy and the character of Hamlet. Through identification and attribute assignment, Relational Processes provide the text with depth and multidimensional interpretive space.

Existential Processes are used to express the concept of existence. Verbal Processes are not dominant in the soliloquy, as Hamlet is mainly speaking to himself rather than engaging in dialogue with others. Behavioural Processes are used less frequently because the soliloquy focuses more on internal activities rather than external behaviors. The frequent use of Mental Processes in the soliloquy reflects Hamlet's philosophical contemplation and emotional struggles, which are the core of this text. His inner conflicts and exploration of the meaning of life are the most prominent themes in this soliloquy, hence the extensive use of Mental Processes.

This soliloquy occurs in Act 3, Scene 1, and is one of the core moments of the play, deeply revealing the inner world of the protagonist Hamlet and his existential crisis.

Hamlet is a Prince of Denmark, a thoughtful, conflicted, and indecisive character. His father is murdered by his own uncle Claudius, who then usurps the throne and marries Hamlet's mother. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears and reveals the truth to him, urging Hamlet to seek revenge. Hamlet struggles between morality, philosophy, and personal emotions, unsure of how to deal with this betrayal and injustice. Prior to this soliloquy, Hamlet has already staged a play within the play, successfully confirming Claudius's guilt. During the soliloquy, Hamlet is alone, immersed in contemplation on the meaning of life.

The opening of the soliloquy with "To be, or not to be" is one of the most famous questions in literary history, expressing Hamlet's questioning of the meaning of life. Hamlet grapples between action and hesitation, reflecting his character traits and fear of the consequences of revenge. His contemplation on death in the soliloquy reveals Hamlet's fear of the unknown and curiosity about possible states after death. Hamlet's soliloquy delves into philosophical questions of free will, moral responsibility, and human existence. This soliloquy is one of the most famous segments in Shakespeare's works, having a profound influence on later literary and dramatic works, often quoted and analyzed. Hamlet's inner monologue showcases the complexity of human nature and the psychological struggles faced when confronting moral dilemmas. This soliloquy is pivotal in "Hamlet", not only revealing the protagonist's psychological state but also serving as a turning point in the plot, providing the audience with deep insights into Hamlet's character and motivations.

5. CONCLUSION

Functional grammar theory remains an extremely valuable tool for literary text analysis. It provides a structured framework to help reveal how language is used to express complex human experiences. By identifying and analyzing the ideational functions within the text, readers can gain a deeper understanding of characters' inner worlds, authors' intentions, and the societal and cultural contexts reflected in the text. Additionally, functional grammar analysis is significant for literary teaching and criticism, providing new perspectives and tools for literary studies. It also promotes understanding of language as a tool for expression and communication, inspiring writers, poets, and language learners alike.

Although Halliday's functional grammar theory provides profound insights and rich understanding for literary text analysis, it also has some limitations. Firstly, the theory may be influenced by its cultural background of origin and may not be universally applicable to all cultural and linguistic environments. The explanation of discourse coherence requires considering the multiple functions of speech. (Redeker, 1990) Secondly, the

complexity of functional grammar requires analysts to possess specialized linguistic knowledge, which may limit its accessibility among non-specialist readers. Additionally, the diversity of literary texts means that multiple analytical methods may be needed to fully understand different texts, and functional grammar may not be suitable for all types of texts. Furthermore, the multiple meanings in texts may result in functional grammar analysis not covering all possible interpretations. Additionally, the theory primarily focuses on language structure and may not be sufficient to explain non-linguistic factors in texts, such as symbolism, metaphor, and the author's personal experiences. In conclusion, while the limitations of applying functional grammar theory should be carefully considered, it undoubtedly offers valuable insights and profound understanding for literary analysis.

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