Demystifying Halliday's Metafunctions of Language

Justine Bakuuro[1]

Abstract

According to Michael Halliday, a language evolves in response to the specific demands of the society in which it is used. The nature of the language is closely related to the functions it has to serve. Halliday's theory of Systematic functional grammar is constructed around some basic concepts, one of which is the concept of "metafunction". Considering the clause as a unit in which meanings of three different kinds are combined, the clause serves as a pivot around which metafunctional discussions centre. Halliday divides the way we use language into three different metafunctions. The textual metafunction of the clause portrays it as having a theme and a rheme – clause as a message. The interpersonal metafunction of it however portrays it as having mood and residue – clause as an exchange. And finally, the ideational metafunction of the clause portrays it as having transitivity (process), participants(s) and circumstance(s). The study serves to help the systemic functional linguistics student to understand the key pillars of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG).The study may be termed as "SFG made easy".

Keywords: systemic functional grammar**,** language, metafunction, theme and rheme, mood, transitivity.

Simplifying the Three Hallidayan Metafunctions of Language

The textual metafunction underscores the fact that language is used to organise discourse and create continuity and flow in our texts or in conversations. The THEME in a clause, looked at from a textual metafunctional point of view, commences the semantic rendition of the clause and it is the principal grammatical system/element whilst the rheme ensures the expansion of the discoursal process beyond the theme. The textual metafunction of the clause plays both linguistic and social roles in the use of the language. The theme is the starting point of the message as the message actually starts off from there whilst the rheme is the rest of the message. In the discoursal pieces below, the theme-rheme relationship of the clause is clearly illustrated. The patterns of textual development which gives rise to clause as a message is equally amply exhibited.

Key: *T = Theme *First underling = Theme
       *R = Rheme *Second underlining = Rheme

1. T – R   Dakurahlives in a mansion
   ↓↓
   TT – R   The mansionwas constructed in his youthful days.
      ↓
      T - R   Whenhe was well-to-do.
        ↓
        T – R   …   The mansionnow needs some refurbishment.

From the foregoing discoursal illustrations, it is obvious that the textual metafunction of language is championed by the theme-rheme relationship of the clause.

Among others, textual themes may include:

1. Conjunctions: and, because, so, yet etc.
2. Relations: who, which, whose, whom etc.
3. Continuatives: well, yes, ah, mm.., etc.
4. Conjunctives: in addition, besides, in other words, etc.

---

[1] Department of English, University of Ghana-Legon, Ghana-West Africa

This is illustrated in the short discourse:

    The boy went there

    and was returned

    because he had no passport.

The interpersonal metafunction of the clause views language use as involving interactions where we initiate or respond to the act of giving or demanding for goods-and-services or information. Halliday and Mathiessen (2004) regard this function as one of exchange. The principal grammatical system/element here is the Mood network, within which is a choice between imperative and indicative. The mood carries the interpersonal functions of the clause and consists of Subject + Finite. The subject is realised by a nominal group that the speaker gives responsibility to for the validity of the clause while the Finite is realised by the first of the verbal group. The rest of the verbal group is the predicator, which forms part of the residue. A clause thus consists of Mood + Residue. The Mood element can be identified in Mood Tags (generally known as question tags). The following tables illustrate the interpersonal metafunction of the clause:

TABLE I

Ajo	shall	play	the match
Subject	Finite	Predicator	Complement
MOOD		RESIDUE	

TABLE II

Franklin	can	shoot	a gun	can't	he?
Subject	Finite	Predicator	Complement	Finite	Subject
MOOD		RESIDUE		MOOD TAG	

    The exchange of information in the clause involves an intangible, verbal commodity andlanguage is the end in itself. The giving of information often takes the form of a statement, a declarative denoted by Subject + Finite whilst the demanding of information is expressed by a question realised by an interrogative, as indicated in tables I & II.

In the ideational/experiential metafunction of language, according to Halliday, we use language as an instrument of thought or to conceptualize or represent the experiential or real world to ourselves, including the inner world of our own consciousness. In using the clause to represent or conceptualize the real world to ourselves, the principal grammatical element identified by Halliday in the ideational metafunction of language is Transitivity. This term stands for the verbal group in the clause and Halliday defines it as the overall resource for constructing goings on (experience). It means the kind of activity expressed by a sentence participants and the manner of participants. Under the ideational metafunction of language the clause three component as illustrated in the diagram.

Also, to portray the clause as representing our real world of experiences, let's consider the clause below and its components:

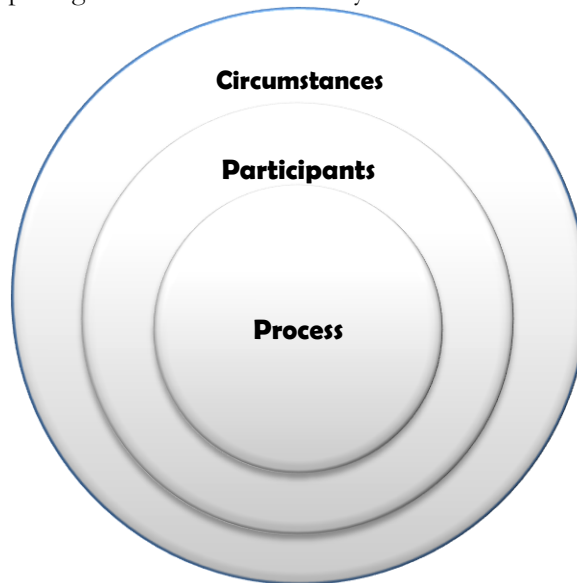The porter sent us a message this morning telling us to vacate the room.

- Process: Sent to vacate.
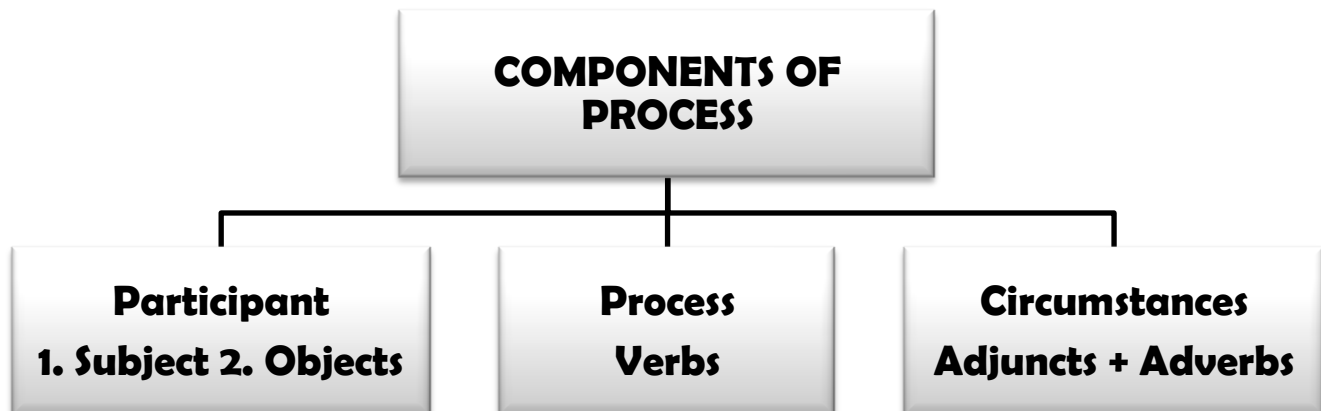
- Participants: The porter, us, a message, the room

- Circumstances: This morning, telling us.

Find below, a structure depicting the nature of transitivity in a clause in relation to participants and circumstances.

From the diagram, it is clear that the

1. Process (transitivity) is the "embryo" of the clause without which there is actually no clause. Supporting this "embryo" to develop is the participants (made of subjects and objects). At the periphery of the embryonic structure is the circumstances (made of adjuncts and adverbs).

   In sum, the three metafunctions of language, according to Halliday, cannot be realised without the use of the clause which is considered the highest grammatical unit (try Halliday's) systematic functional grammar. Halliday believes language is used for the social benefit of man and this for it to be useful to man, it must manifest itself in the three metafunctional ways discussed above; and that can only be done adequately by the use of the clause, hence the centrality of the role played by the clause in the three metafunctions of systemic functional grammar.

2. In the opinion of Professor Michael A.K. Halliday of the University of Sydney, Australia who is the father of Systematic Functional Grammar (SFG), a language evolves in response to the specific demands of the society in which it is used. He adds that "the nature of language is closely related to the functions it has to serve" and that, "it reflects aspects of the situation in which it occurs".

   Language is a representation of human experience, he opines. He explains we use language as an instrument of thought or to conceptualize or represent the experiential or the real world to ourselves, including the inner world of our own consciousness. Therefore, another name for clause as representation is clause as experiential construct. Halliday terms this aspect of language use as the ideational function of language.

   Halliday identifies four key functions of language according to its users as follows:

a. Language is a means of reflecting on things. b. It is used to represent or conceptualize the real outside and inner worlds of the individual. c. it is a means of acting on things by means of a symbolic system. d. Language is also used for interactivity between or among people.

   Clause as a representation has three distinct components. We have the participant(s) (subject(s) and objects(s)), the process (verb(s)) and the circumstances (adjunct(s) and adverb(s)). It is these identifiable components that outline the human experience conceptualized or represented. Let us consider the clause below in respect of participants, process and circumstance.

   Our auntie bought him a nice shirt last at the mall.

- Process: bought.
- Participants: Our auntie, him, a nice shirt.
- Circumstances: Last Easter, at the mall.

In examining clause as a representation, of paramount significance is the factor of transitivity. This factor encompasses the process. The process largely determines the types of participants that are possible within a given clausal structure. Halliday tags this the System of Transitivity.

Transitivity is thus the total resource for constructing happenings or goings-on (experience) within a clause. It means the kind of activity expressed by a sentence participants and the manner of participants. The diagram below vividly underscores the significance of process in transitivity within the clause.
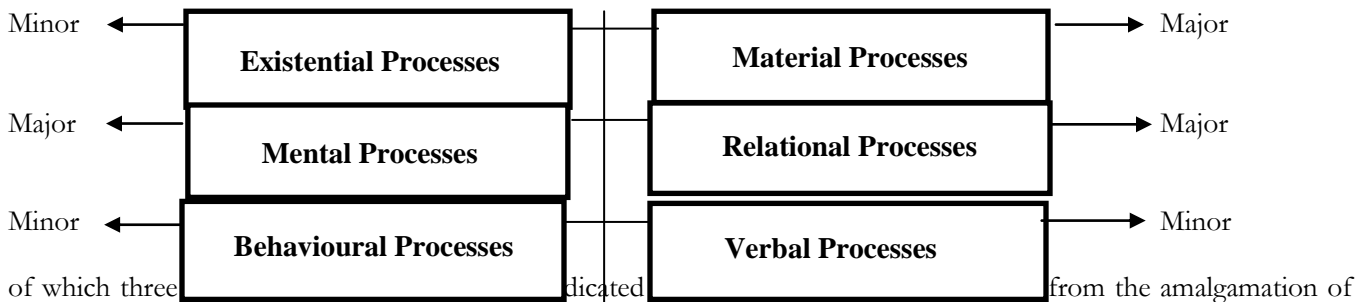
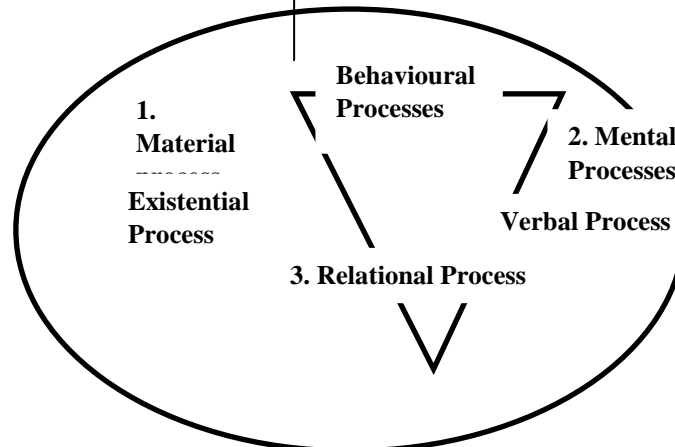### TRANSITIVITY STRUCTURE

Circumstances

Participants
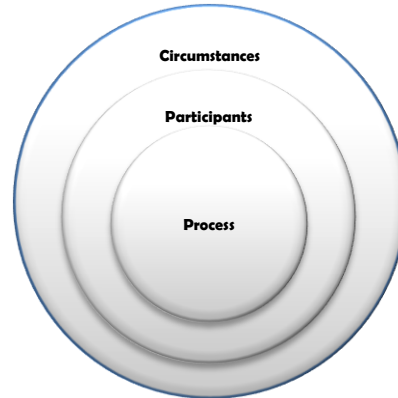
Process

From the diagram, the clause is represented as an egg with three parts or layers arranged in order of importance. The innermost layer, the process can be likened to the embryo of an egg which is the part that finally develops into the chicken. The second layer, the participants, hold stronger influence over the circumstances in that, without the participants, the process is not complete or cannot be conceptualised or represented in the human mind. The circumstances, the last layer and least important, caters for the manner, time or type of participants or process as it were. Clearly, therefore, the circumstance(s) in a clause are droppable or less important structures without which he clause can stand.

Process(es)which underpin transitivity in the clause has sixty types;

TYPES OF PROCESSES

Minor ←		Major →
Existential Processes		**Material Processes**
Major ←		Major →
Mental Processes		**Relational Processes**
Minor ←		Minor →
Behavioural Processes		**Verbal Processes**

of which three ....dicated ....from the amalgamation of two each of the major processes. See the diagram below:

Behavioural Processes

1. Material process

Existential Process

2. Mental Processes

**Verbal Process**

3. Relational Process

The existential processes in this diagram are processes that are neither completely relational nor material; the verbal process is neither completely mental nor relational and the behavioural process is neither completely material not mental. The diagram below shows the meaning of each type of process and examples.

Process Type	Meaning	Examples	
Material	Doing	Run, kick, climb, spring etc. He kicked the post	
Mental	Thinking, knowing	Like, hate, love, know, think, understand. Mary liked the gift	
Relational	Being, having	Sounds, are, is Sarah is wise	
Behavioural	Verbal, mental	Cough, yawn, smile, sleep, faint, breathe They frowned	
Verbal	Saying	Told, said, instruct etc. He told me a story	
Existential	Existing	Was, lived, is etc. There was an old man	

For the processes also, the table below shows their components.

Process Type	Meaning	Examples	
Verbal	Actor	Goal	
Mental	Sensor	Phenomenon	
Relational	Carrier/identified	Attribute/identifier	
Behavioural	Behaviour	---	
Verbal	Sayer	Receiver/target	
Existential	Existent	---	

The first subject or object in the clause is the participant 1 whilst the subsequent subject(s) or object(s) are called participants 2.

E.g.:   **Dad**   **bought me**   **a nice skirt**

Participant   Process   Participant   Participant
1   3   4
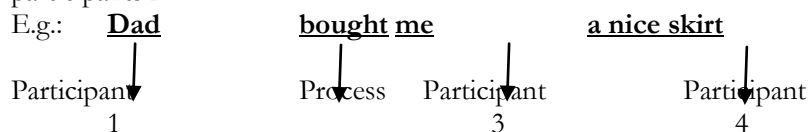
The diagram below also shows the main types of circumstances within the clause:

TYPE	SPECIFIC	EXAMPLE
Extent	Distance, duration	For far two minutes, etc.
Location	Place, time	In June, from Accra, there etc.
Manner	Means, quality, comparison	With a hammer, loosely

The droppable/least important elements in the clause – the circumstance – takes various forms as illustrated above. The textual metafunction of language falls within the domain of clause as a message. Under this function, "we organise our messages in ways that indicate how they fit in with other messages around them and with the wider context in which we are talking or writing." (Thompson, 2004:30). The textual metafunction represents the relationship to textual interactivity (which is examined with reference to disfluenciessuch as hesitators, pauses and repetitions), spontaneity (natural or unrestraint reaction) which is determined through a focus on lexical density, grammatical complexity, coordination (how clauses are linked together) and the use of nominal groups and communicative distance, which involves looking at a text's cohesion - that is how it hangs together, as well as any abstract language it uses.

The textual orientation is about the verbal world, especially the flow of information in a text and is concerned with clauses as messages. It is described by Halliday (1994:97) as the "relevance" or the enabling function. As a message structure, a clause consists of a theme accompanied by a rheme. The theme is the element which serves as the point of departure or commencement of the message and the rhemeis the part in which the theme is developed. According to Eggins(1994:275), the theme typically contains familiar or given information, i.e. into which has been given somewhere in the text or is similar, from the context. Let's have a look at the theme – rhemedenotation of a few clauses below:

The thief + has stolen my father's hat.
My father's + hat has been stolen by the thief.

THEME   RHEME

In the above, we have players. That is, doer and receiver. From the above the speaker has chosen what elements he deems fit to become the themes in the two sentences.Hence, a theme in a clause, is a matter of the speaker/writer's choice and not a fixed element. As Hoang Van Van (2006:161) points out, functional grammar provides linguists "a very rich pool of instruments which helps researchers to tackle not only phonological but also grammatical (syntax), semantic and discoursal problems of a text.

In the interpersonal metafunction, we use *** to interact with other people to establish and maintain relationships with them, to influence their behaviour or to express our own view point of things in the world and to elicit or exchange theirs. (Thompson 2004:30). The interpersonal metafunction represents the aspects of a text regarding speaker or writer/persona (variation, social distance, and relative social status. The social distance and relative social status are only applicable only to spoken texts. The speaker/writer concerns the stance, personalisation and standby of the speaker/writer. This involves looking at whether the writer/speaker has a natural attitude which can be seen through the use of nicknames which shows the extent of their intimacy. Relative social status asks whether they are equal in terms of power and knowledge on a subject. For instance, the relationship between a mother and a child would be considered unequal. The focus here is on speech acts (i.e. whether one person tends to ask questions and the other speaker tends to answer). The interpersonal metafunction is about the social world, especially the relationship between speaker and hearer and is concerned with clauses as exchanges. As Halliday (1994:68) puts it: "the most fundamental types of *** role which lie behind all the more specific types that we may eventually be able to recognise are just two (i) giving and (ii) demanding. This means there are two roles in exchange: giving and demanding. He goes on to analyse the nature of the commodity being exchanged into (a) goods and services and (b) information. This analysis is illustrated below:

ROLE IN EXCHANGE	COMMODITY	
giving	goods & source	Information
	"offer"	Statement
Would	you like	this teapot?
demanding	command	question

In analysis, a clause as an exchange of interactive event, Halliday realises the two components in a clause: mood (Subject + Finite) and the residue. The mood is the component carrying the syntactic burden of the exchange and "carries" the argument forward" (Halliday 1994:71). It consists of two parts:
1. The subject, which is a nominal group and
2. The Finite operator which is part of a verbal group.
The residue, according to Halliday, consists of functional elements, of three kinds – Predicator, Complement and Adjunct (P. 113).

The creation of meaning in the course of the unfolding of a text is called logogenetic patterns under the concept of text. When people speak or write they produce texts. The term "texts" refers to any instance of language in any medium that makes sense to some who knows the language (Halliday and Hassau, 1976). To a grammarian, a text is a rich, many faceted phenomenon that operates in many different ways. The organisation of a text is semantic rather than formal. Textual organisation has typically been represented in terms of some form of structural notation. But it is important to be able to think of a text dynamically as an ongoing process of meaning.

References

Bloor, T., & Bloor, M. (2004). The Functional Analysis of English (2nd ed.). London: Arnold.

Brooks, J. (2009-2010). The Growing Absurdity of the South African Apartheid: Transitivity in Christopher Van Wyk's "In Detention". Innervate-Leading Undergraduate Work in English studies, 2(2009-2010), 26-34.

Burton, D. (1996). Through Glass Darkly: Through Dark Glasses (on Stylistic and Political Commitment – Via a Study of a Passage from Sylvia Plath's the Bell Jar). Stylistics Reader: From Roman Jakobson to the Present, 224-240. New York: St Martin's Press.

Carter, R. (1982). Language and Literature. London: Routledge.

Carter, R., & Stockwell, P. (2008). The Language and Literature Reader. London: Routledge.

Fairclough, N. (1989). Language and Power. New York: Longman Group UK Limited.

Fairclough, N. (2001). Critical Discourse Analysis as a Method in Social Scientific Research. In Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds), Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (pp. 121-138). London: Sage Publications. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020.d8

Fairclough, N. (2003). Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Fowler, R. (1986). Linguistic Criticism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gee, J. P. (2005). An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method. London: Routledge.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1971). Linguistic Function and Literary Style: An Inquiry into the Language of William Golding's the Inheritors. In Chatman, S. (Ed.), Literary Style: A Symposium (pp. 330-368). New York: Oxford University Press.

Halliday, A. K. (1985). An Introduction to Functional Grammar (2nd ed.). London, Melbourne, Auckland:Edward Arnold.

Halliday, M. A. K., &Hasan, R. (1985). Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective. Victoria: Deakin University Press.

-Halliday, M. A. K., &Matthiessen, C. M. (2004). An Introduction to Functional Grammar (3rd ed.). London:Arnold.

-Hasan, R. (1988). The Analysis of One Poem: Theoretical Issues in Practice. In Birch, D., &O'Tool, M. (Eds.), Functions and Styles (pp. 45-73). London: Edward Arnold.

Volume 2   Issue 3 December 2015

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND CULTURAL STUDIES ISSN 2356-5926

http://ijhcschiefeditor.wix.com/ijhcs Page 292

Kress, G. (Ed.). (1976). Halliday: System and Function in Language: Selected Papers. London: Oxford University Press.

Kroger, R. O., & Wood, L. A. (2000). Doing Discourse Analysis: Method for Studying Action in Talk and Text. California: Sage Publications, Inc.

Lester, M. (1969). The Relation of Linguistics to Literature. JSTOR: College English, 30(5), 366370.

Simpson, P. (1993). Language, Ideology and Point of View. New York: Routledge. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203312612

Thompson, G. (2004). Introducing Functional Grammar. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wodak, R. (2001). What CDA Is About – a Summary of Its History, Important Concepts and Its Development. In Ruth Wodak, & Michael Meyer (Eds.), Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (PP.1-13).London: