Language, Ideology and Point of View

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4 Encoding experience in language: the system of transitivity

Something must have happened to me sometime.
(Joseph Heller, Something Happened)

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Picture, if you will, the following scenario. You are sitting in your boss's office anxiously awaiting news about your recent application for promotion. But just before announcing the outcome of your application, your boss is called away to take a phone call in another office. You sit nervously, rubbing together the palms of your hands. On the desk in front of you is an expensive-looking miniature replica Ming vase. You pick up this little cobalt-blue objet d'art and turn it deftly in your hands. Then, of course, catastrophe strikes: as you're turning it, it slips through your fingers and smashes into a dozen or so fragments on the varnished oak floor. You stare at it vacuously. After what seems like a lifetime, your boss returns. She stares at the pieces on the floor and then frowns at you in clear anticipation of an explanation. What do you say to her?

Let us suppose you decide to make a clean breast of it and offer the following remark by way of explanation:

(1) I broke the vase.

In this grammatically active sentence, the 'doer' has been placed first whereas the object affected has been positioned last. This certainly foregrounds your involvement in the incident, leaving no doubt about your responsibility for the breakage. Perhaps this 'up-front' approach is the sort of thing your boss respects. Or perhaps not. You decide therefore that (1) is a little too direct, and that the following is more appropriate:

(2) The vase was broken by me.

By converting (1) to its passive equivalent in this way, you have rearranged the original sequence of information. The object affected is now placed first, whilst the agent responsible for the breakage is now shifted towards the end of the sentence. Perhaps this more subtle explanation is what your boss would prefer. Then again, maybe not. You feel the passive form is basically a good idea, but it sounds a little clumsy. You also feel that the removal of the 'doer' of the process is desirable. On balance, then, (3) seems the best policy:

(3) The vase was broken.

This strategy exploits a feature of the passive in that it has been possible to remove the optional 'by -' phrase from the end of the sentence. However, although the 'by -' phrase has disappeared, your boss can still react to (3) by asking Who by? Maybe the safest tactic is to construct a sentence which will not support a who by? question. You opt therefore for the following:

(4) The vase broke.

Like all of the options you have considered, (4) is a true statement about what happened. The 'pay-off' here, as far as you are concerned, is that in (4) the 'doer' has been excised completely from the process, fending off the awkward who by? question. On the other hand, there is the risk that the boss may think you're being disingenuous or that you are rather spineless. Perhaps a more direct approach, like that of (1) say, is needed.

The four possibilities considered here represent different ways of encoding in language our experience of a particular event. Something has happened and circumstances dictate that we must select words to describe it. In this case the particular selections which we make are from the system of transitivity and it is this system which forms the remit of the present chapter.

The fact that transitivity has proved a useful analytic model in both stylistics and critical linguistics makes it a useful bridge between the analysis of narrative fiction and other discourse types. This chapter will reflect this multifunctionality by examining both narrative and media language, demonstrating, I hope, that the potential range of this model is extensive. The concept of transitivity will be introduced in the next section. In keeping with the precedent set earlier, this will take the form of a montage of various theories, all pared down to form as neat and economical a model as possible. Section 4.3 will apply this model to some samples of prose fiction. This should supplement the analyses undertaken in the previous two chapters and should add another
4.2 THE TRANSITIVITY MODEL

In this study, the term *transitivity* is used in a much wider sense than that employed in traditional grammars. Here it refers generally to how meaning is represented in the clause. It shows how speakers encode in language their mental picture of reality and how they account for their experience of the world around them. Modality, as we saw earlier, is an important part of the interpersonal function of language. By contrast, transitivity, because it is concerned with the transmission of ideas, is part of the *ideational* function of language. The way in which transitivity carries out this ideational function is by expressing *processes*. Halliday explains what this means:

> What does it mean to say that a clause represents a process? Our most powerful conception of reality is that it consists of ‘goings-on’: of doing, happening, feeling, being. These goings-on are sorted out in the semantic system of the language and expressed through the grammar of the clause.

(1985: 101)

The semantic processes expressed by clauses have potentially three components. These are:

1. *Process* itself, which will be expressed by the verb phrase in a clause.
2. The *participants* involved in the process. These roles are typically realized by noun phrases in the clause.
3. The *circumstances* associated with the process, normally expressed by adverbial and prepositional phrases.

Processes can be classified according to whether they represent actions, speech, states of mind or simply states of being. What I propose to do is to account for the major processes realized in the system and the participant roles that are associated with them.

### 4.2.1 Material processes

These are simply processes of *doing*. Material processes have two inherent participant roles associated with them. The first of these is the *actor*, an obligatory element which represents the ‘doer’ of the process expressed by the clause. The second is an optional *goal* which represents the person or entity affected by the process. Here are two examples illustrating these configurations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTOR</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
<th>GOAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>kicked</td>
<td>the ball.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lion</td>
<td>sprang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because a *goal* element is present in (5), we can re-arrange this sentence into a passive form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOAL</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
<th>ACTOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ball</td>
<td>was kicked</td>
<td>by John.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although both the original participants are still present in this clause, the *goal* element is placed first and the *actor* shifted to the end of the sentence.

Material processes can be subdivided on the basis of finer distinctions in meaning. If the process is performed by an animate actor, it is referred to as an *action* process. The term *event* process is reserved for those processes which, by contrast, are performed by an inanimate actor. Action processes may themselves be further subdivided into *intention* processes (where the actor performs the act voluntarily) and *supervision* processes (where the process just happens).

We can develop a network for this system of material processes. The schema below illustrates how the subcategories interrelate with one another and provides sample sentences for each type. Distinctions become more ‘delicate’ as the system progresses rightwards.

- **Action process**
  - John kicked the ball.
  - The lion sprang.

- **Supervision process**
  - The boy fell over.
  - Mary slipped.

- **Intention process**
  - John kicked the ball.
  - The lion sprang.

- **Event process**
  - The lake shimmered.
  - The car backfired.

(Adapted from Berry 1975)

Two brief comments are necessary on material processes before we move on to the next category. First, it is not always easy to separate out