

## Lecture 4: Transitivity: the representation of social action

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In the previous lecture we looked at how the way participants are represented in texts and speech can shape the way that we perceive them, portraying them in ways that tend to align us alongside or against them without overtly stating the case. In this lecture we see how the way we perceive people can also be shaped by the representation of transitivity. This too can help to promote certain discourses and certain ideologies.

Transitivity is simply the study of what people are depicted as doing. This allows us to reveal who plays an important role in a particular clause and who receives the consequences of that action. A transitivity analysis of clause structure shows us who is mainly given a subject (agent/participant) or object (affected/patient) position. In other words who acts and how, who does not. Simply it is asking who does what to whom. Transitivity is an analytical component that allows us to deal with the huge variety of goings on in the world into a small number of categories. But of course speakers and authors often seek to conceal, obscure or confuse who is subject or object. They might also wish to give a sense that other participants are doing more than they in fact are.

Linguists have explored the lexical choices available for representing actions. Halliday (1978) grouped verbs into categories of 'process types'. These can be used to detect the kind of agency attributed to an actor. Here I have glossed Halliday's (1978) six processes:

- *Material*: This is simply doing something in the world that has a material result or consequence. "The woman built the house".
- *Behavioural*: This is where we act without material outcome. eg "the boy jumped".
- *Mental*: This is where a person thinks evaluates or senses. For example, "The boy saw the dog"
- *Verbal*: This is where a person is represented as simply saying something saying. For example, "The man talked about democracy".
- *Relational*: This is where people are represented as being like, or different to, something else – "The militia had crude weapons." (in contrast to the US soldiers) or simply "the boy was taller".
- *Existential* - This is where people are represented simply in a state of existing, appearing – "he sat in the chair".

*The pilot bombed the village*

*The civilians were in the house*

*The soldier protected the civilians*

*The woman waited and thought, wishing for him and then sang*

*The politician said it was time to act*

*The politician was not attractive*

At the most basic level we can see that some of these processes are 'transitive; ie a transaction is involved such as 'The pilot bombed the house', and others are non transitive, where there is no direct outcome such as 'The civilians were in the house'. This in itself can give us a sense of who is represented as the agent in a text. Another way of thinking about this is in terms of the way that participants in a clause, social actors, can be activated or passivated. Activated, social actors are represented as "the active, dynamic forces in an activity" (Van Leeuwen, 1996: 43-44), the ones who do things and make things happen. Being activated, in this view, is an important and generally positive aspect of representation. An activated actor's capacity for "action, for making things happen, for controlling others and so forth, is accentuated" (Fairclough, 2003: 150). Action processes foreground agency, contributing to representations of power (ibid: 113).

On the other hand it is often the case that participants who are made the subjects of mental processes are constructed as the focalizers or reflectors of action. These actors are allowed an internal view of themselves. This can be one device through which listeners and readers can be encouraged to have empathy. But it can also be one way that these participants appear very busy whereas they only engage in mental processes. And if these mental verbs are mainly about sensing and reacting this can also convey passivity. Existential processes can be fairly passive as these simply describe location and relational processes are simply about definition of the category to which a subject belongs.

But this can be complex as we show later and we must be careful to see who is activated, whether animal, nature, abstract or complex nouns and also look for ways that this can be concealed or played down through a number of grammatical strategies. On the other hand, passivated, “what is accentuated is their subjection to precesses, them being affected by the actions of others” (ibid).

We can see from the above list that it would be a simple matter to identify what kinds of actions a participant in a text is engaged in and what this says about their role in the social world represented in the text. Machin and Thornborrow (2006), for example, use this model to show how in women’s magazines women are highly active but in non material processes, in other words those that have no outcome. So the women might be busy ‘hoping’, ‘worrying’, ‘walking’, ‘watching’, ‘reading’, in other words mainly behavioural and mental processes rather than material ones which actually bring about change in the world. This is even though the magazine is branded as for the ‘Fun, Fearless, Female’. The process patterns have been noted of the way that women behave in romantic fiction:

*She trailed through life in that red dressing-gown  
she moved languidly about  
she was so dull of understanding  
she sat upright and quiet, with wide-open eyes*

Van Leeuwen (1994: 90) uses the same analytical framework to describe the way that children are represented textually in contrast to teachers. He analyses the texts for ‘transitivity’, in other words, actions that have an outcome. The analysis reveals that children, in contrast to teachers, are rarely represented as having an effect on the world. He concludes:

‘clearly the ability to ‘transit’ requires a certain power, and the greater that power, the greater the range of ‘goals’ that may be affected by the actors actions’ (1994: 90)

There is a theoretical assumption here, therefore, that levels of actor agency are directly correlated to material process types and that individuals or groups not involved in such processes are represented as being weak agents. Teo (2000: 27) concludes that the agents or dominant subjects are those attributed with material or verbal processes. In contrast those who are not may be ‘ineffectual’ (p27).

Below are a few examples from medical journals relating to childbirth. There has been much discussion in such journals and in government policy about the way that women can be empowered to make their own choices for the kind of delivery they want, so that they can avoid unnecessary medical intervention. But this choice has never materialised and what are often pointless medical procedures are carried out automatically. Central to this issue is that much government policy has emphasised that greater power should be given to midwives and less given to obstetricians whose very *raison de etre* is to carry out surgical procedures. In units run by midwives for example there are few caesarean sections but these are usual in obstetrics driven wards. If examine recent journals we find certain process types dominating the accounts of how the two groups behave.

The obstetricians

*common surgical procedures performed by obstetrician*

*residents undertake perineal repair*

*educators of the next generation of obstetricians and gynaecologists formally instruct the repair*

The Midwives

*we have to really believe in our ability to give birth normally before we can convince others*

*We have to be able to talk about normal birth in a way that encourages people to want it*

*We have to really want normal birth before anyone will have any confidence in it'*

*postcards you can use to send to colleagues, exchange ideas or tell us how you feel*

*use stories to make a point*

We can see similarities between the midwives and the women in Machin and Thornborrow's (2006) magazines and in Teo's (2000) description of the agency of immigrant groups.

### Unspecified reactions

One category of reactions are those that are not defined. Such as:

*The policeman reacted*

*The soldiers responded*

Of course these can be used to conceal certain kinds of actions.

We can observe that different categories of participants are often given different types of reactions. In adverts consumers tend to 'desire', 'need', 'want' whereas the advertiser tends to 'think', 'know' and 'understand'. What is the difference between the two sets?

### **Grammatical positioning of actions**

#### **Prepositional phrases and subordinate clauses**

For Fairclough the second strategy of representing social action is "within a circumstance, such as within a prepositional phrase or subordinate clause. Fairclough sees subordinate clauses as useful for achieving backgrounding of certain acts. Prepositional phrases are called this as they begin with a preposition such as 'for', 'at' or 'after'. So we will have the main clause 'We bought it' and the prepositional phrase 'for them'. A newspaper headline might use a main clause and a prepositional clause as in 'Boy stabbed at school'. A subordinate clause will begin with a conjunction such as 'then, or 'after' or relative pronoun such as 'which' or 'whose'. So we can have 'I paid the shopkeeper when I before I left the shop'. The last part 'when I left the shop is the subordinate clause'

Richardson (2007: 207) argues that prepositional phrases are used to provide context for dominant clauses. When analysing newspaper headlines he says that preposition phrases were used to provide context for dominant clauses therefore reducing responsibility for the action. The action would be in the dominant clause and the prepositional phrase would supply the details of the time place and manner of action (Ibid). Richardson gives the example of a headline "Children killed in US assault" (Guardian, 2 April 2003). Here 'Children killed' is the emphasis of the sentence. The dominant clause, and 'in US assault' is deemphasised in the prepositional phrase. Richardson suggests the editor could have written the same information as 'US kill children in assault'. Here 'US kill children is the domain clause and the children are appassivated in the prepositional phrase that provides details and context.

Van Dijk (1991) has also discussed the way atht actions can be played down when placed later in a sentence of embedded in a clause.

He says “Events may be strategically played down by the syntactic structure of the sentences, for example, by referring to the event in a lower (later, less prominent) embedded clause, or conversely by putting it in the first position when the events need extra prominence’ (1991:216).

### **Passivised verbs without agents**

Van Dijk (1991:215-216) found “...negative acts of in-group members, such as the authorities or the police, may be reduced in effect by placing them later in the sentence or by keeping the agency implicit, for instance in passive sentences” s

One important quality of the examples showing suppression is that this is one way by which who acts and who has responsibility can be obscured (Fairclough, 2000:163). These are called passive verb structures. For example:

*The civilians were killed during a bombing raid*

*The government found itself facing allegations of spin this week following the release of some confusing crime statistics*

In all of these sentences who carried out the action is missing. But passive verb structures can be used with agents such as:

*The civilians were protected by the soldiers*

In an analysis of a text we can ask which kinds of participants are described in passive verb sentences and which are not. Van Dijk (2000) has shown, for example, that ethnic minorities are only shown as active agents where they do something bad. Where they are associated with anything positive they are represented in a passive role where things are done for or against them.

*Muslim community was attacked*

*Muslim extremists demanded change in the law*

### **Adjuncts**

The analysis of the medical journals on the subject of agency in childbirth revealed a further way that the midwives were de-agentalised through their grammatical positioning (Van Leeuwen, 1995). The lexical choice of adjuncts had significant impact upon the actor’s status as social agents. This functioned to de-centre the midwives. For example, in a key opening paragraph midwives are described as being:

*routinely involved in assessing and recording the extent of perineal trauma ... and (being) responsible for initiating appropriate interventions and treatment.*

From this we can see that midwives did not do the assessing, recording or intervention, rather they were part of these processes or at best simply started them off rather than being the executors or managers. Thus, even when they are involved in an action profile with a material outcome, they are functionally de-centred from their activity by the use of the adjuncts *involved* and *initiating*, both of which show that midwives are not really in charge of doing the action. Such grammatical de-centring suggests that midwives are not autonomous practitioners but answer to another authoritative body.

We found that such lexical de-centring of the social actors was a consistent pattern that ran throughout the midwifery texts. For example, of the eight clauses within text 1, representing the action processes of midwives, five decentred the midwife within the clause structure. This was not true of the obstetricians.

It was clear that the obstetrics journal had in no way found their own position transformed by government guidelines. This helps to explain why medical intervention and particularly caesarean-section rates have not decreased despite the establishment of birth plans and the aim to return some control to midwives.

The midwifery journals also revealed that there was a main social agent present, but that this agent was an unidentified third person. This presence was evoked through their business of ‘*expecting*’, ‘*accepting*’ and ‘*recognising*’ midwives should or should not, must or must not, behave in a certain way.

For example:

*midwives are expected to make assessments regarding management of perineal trauma that are vitally important to the long-term health of women.*  
*it is common practice and a generally accepted rule within many maternity units’*  
*Perineal repair is recognised as a role of the midwife*

Who is doing the expecting and who’s accepted rule it is remains unspecified. Clearly those in power do not have such mysterious powers watching over them or defining their role and we found no such absentee actor included in the obstetric text. The implications of this discovery were that, not only did the represented midwives achieve very little in terms of material outcome, but the little that they did was done only through deferential reference to this unidentified social actor.

*Students are expected to make payment of library fines by the end of semester.*  
*Parents of children in the swimming club are expected to pay for sessions two weeks in advance.*

The following text can be usefully analysed for transitivity. How are these different for ‘Australians’ and ‘immigrants’?

### Our Race Odyssey

This country will be vastly different next century if Australians feel they cannot voice legitimate fears about immigration without being branded racists, argues David Jenkins.

In Florence last month 80 young white thugs, many wearing costume masks and armed with iron bars roamed the narrow cobbled streets attacking African street vendors.

In France, where non-European immigrants make up 6.5 percent of the population, former president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing proposed a total halt to immigration.

In Japan a nation with a strong tradition of keeping foreigners at arm’s length, similar concerns are being expressed about a mere trickle of Third World immigrants.

Japan’s National Police Agency had to apologize recently for circulating an internal memo to police stations claiming that Pakistanis working in Japan ‘have a unique body odour’, carry infectious skin diseases and tell lies ‘under the name of Allah’.

The mayor of Kawaguchi has ‘joked’ that with so many dark-skinned foreigners in town, Japanese are having trouble seeing them at night.

In Peru, where the son of a Japanese immigrant is a presidential frontrunner, the situation is reversed.

A racist backlash against ethnic Asians has been unleashed by those who resent the prominence of centrist candidate Alberto Fujimori.

People of Asian descent say they have been insulted in the street denied entry to elegant restaurants and received a sudden cold-shoulder from neighbours and co-workers.

In Canada, where the 250,000 strong Sikh community has pressed for the right to have Mounties in turbans and where 22,000 Hong Kong Chinese arrived last year, bringing bulging wallets to cities like Vancouver, racial tolerance is wearing thin.

‘Native Vancouverites will be made to feel like strangers in their own city as the influx of Asians and the capital freezes them out’, wrote one reader of The Province newspaper in Vancouver.

If you were sitting in Canberra and doing no more than reading the daily newspapers you would be entitled to be a bit concerned by these developments.

They italicize the lesson that people, whatever their race, display their less attractive characteristics when they feel threatened and unable to cope with rapid change in the society around them.

They highlight the fact that racism is seldom far below the surface – whether it is in Western Europe, in Asia, in North or South America.

They may even call into question some aspects of Australia’s immigration program, which is now running at close to record levels, with annual net migration of about 150,000, including 60,000 migrants from Asia.

Is the Australian Government concerned?

Not a bit.

Prime Minister Bob Hawke says he is ‘philosophically’ a high-migration man.

He thinks our current intake is about right.

‘I hope that as we go on’, he said recently, ‘that we may be able to look at higher levels of immigration.’

SI the Prime Minister entitled to be so confident that we have got our immigration policy setting right?

Is he entitled to believe that this nation, which only recently shed the White Australian Policy, is somehow impervious to racist sentiment?

We are entitled to feel proud – not apologetic – about our immigration program...

