# The Construal of the Experiential Meaning in the Manual of Household Electric Appliance

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*Abstract*—**Discourse analysis helps to better understand the meaning of discourse. Studies of discourse analysis from the systemic functional perspective play an important role in the domain of linguistics. The manual of household electric appliance which is widely used in daily life is a special kind of discourse. The experiential meaning of the manual is analyzed on terms of transitivity. It is observed that material process is predominant in the transitivity pattern which constitutes the characteristics of the manual of household electric appliance.**

*Keywords—The Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG); the experiential meaning; transitivity; material process; the manuals of household electric appliances*

## I.    INTRODUCTION

Discourse consists of certain constituents. The different organization of constituents distinguishes one discourse from another. Nowadays, discourse analysis attracts significant attention. Considerable research on discourse analysis has been carried out by scholars both at home and abroad using all kinds of theoretical framework. Studies of discourse analysis from the systemic functional perspective play an important role in the domain of linguistics. The Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) emphasizes that "discourse is language in use" and discourse analysis is the research of language in communication (Huang 2001: 5-6).

In this paper, the author will make a detailed analysis of a particular discourse — the manuals of household electric appliances, within the framework of SGF. The discourse analysis focuses on the experiential meaning of the manuals. With the analysis of experiential meaning, this dissertation presents how the manuals are true to reality, reflect the experience of the objective world and impart the necessary technical knowledge to ordinary people, in the hope of achieving the goal of facilitating both better understanding and more effective writing of the manuals.

The paper will adopt the Hallidayan approach, i.e. SFG theory, to analyze the experiential meaning in the manuals of household electric appliances, focusing on "the 'content' of a message" (Thompson 1996/2000:76). Therefore the study will be conducted within the scope of the ideational metafunction, one of three metafunctions in SFG. The analysis will focus on the experiential meaning of the ideational metafunction in terms of transitivity.

## II.    CONCEPT

Language enables people to build a mental picture of reality, to make sense of what goes on around them and inside them (Halliday 1994/2000: 106). Thompson (1996/2000: 28) points out that" we use language to talk about our experience of the world, including worlds in our own minds, to describe events and states and the entities involved in them." This function of language is known as ideational function. The ideational function is the content function of language, and it represents the speaker's meaning potential as an observer. In fact, Halliday classifies ideational function into two components, one is experiential function, and the other is logical function. The former is mainly concerned with content or ideas, whereas the latter deals with the relationship between ideas.

One major system of grammatical choice is applied to produce the realization of the experiential meaning, which is the system of transitivity. Transitivity construes the world of experience into a manageable set of PROCESS TYPES (Halliday 1994/2000: 106). Therefore, this very system is also known as the system of process types. Halliday (1976: 159) states "transitivity refers to the 'content', or factual-notional structure of the clause in its entirety…all those features of the clause which contribute to the linguistic representation of the speaker's experience come under this heading." This system of transitivity describes and distinguishes different kinds of "goings-on", including happening, doing, sensing, meaning and being and becoming. The system provides a network of choice to obtain the meaning realized by modeling experiential meaning in terms of participant, process and circumstance. These three terms — participant, process and circumstance provide the frame of reference for interpreting our experience of what goes on (Halliday1994/2000:107).

## III.    TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS IN DIFFERENT DISCOURSE

Huang Guowen (2002) states that transitivity analysis of the English versions of the Chinese poem "Qingming" by Dumu, the famous poet in Tang Dynasty, not only "shows how a functional analysis can provide insight into the study of translation", but also "tests the applicability of systemic functional linguistics in discourse analysis and translation studies". Huang classifies the four clauses of "Qingming" into 4 process types, that is meteorological process, relational

process, verbal process and material process in their given order. Huang makes a detailed analysis and comparison of the six translation versions. In those versions, the authors either share the same process type as the original or change the original process type into another, and Huang makes comments on the different versions from the SFG viewpoint. Huang's research presents a new look into the study of translation besides the traditional literary critique and literary translation.

Pang Zhangxian (2003) "selects two texts on the same subject", that is a diary and an advertisement," for a detailed transitivity analysis". Pang's findings (2003) reveal that "in the diary there are more mental processes while in the advertisement there are more material and relational processes". Pang accounts for this by indicating that the purpose of a diary is to channel personal feelings and to write for oneself. In contrast, the purpose of an advertisement is to publicize itself, the more expansive, and the better.

Wang Yin (2010) makes an analysis on the song "Blue and White Porcelain" from the perspective of transitivity. It is found that "materials process and circumstantial elements plays an import role in the comprehension of the scripts for the feeling of tableau and image".

Zhu Qian (2017) studies the poet "After a Journey" (written by Thomas Hardy) by analyzing the six processes in transitivity "with a purpose of reinterpreting the poet's memory to his wife and his permission of regret and melancholy", and it is discovered that material process occupies 51.6%. The findings reveals that material word is the top and it is foundation of the other 5 processed. This opens a new interpretive dimension of the poem.

## IV. EXPERIENTIAL MEANING IN THE MANUALS OF HOUSEHOLD ELECTRIC APPLIANCES

### A. Transitivity Patterns

In this part, the aim is to probe the experiential meaning in selected discourse. The target discourse is six manuals covering the following household electric appliances — MIKE's Mini-folding Hairdryer (Text 1), GENUIN's Ceiling tubular ventilating fan (Text 2), TRIANGLE's Automatic Electric Cooker (Text 3), CROWN's Automatic Electric Air Pad (Text 4), RHUALING's Refrigerator (Text 5) and KMC's Washing Machine (Text 6). Although they show some differences in some perspectives such as structure and organization, the manuals share core features. The choice of such authentic data can present a profound understanding of the practical application of SFG on the basis of SFG's unique discourse analysis. As Eggins (1994: 1) states that among all SFG's very varied applications, a common focus is on the analysis of authentic products of social interaction concerning both the cultural and social context in which they are negotiated. The research is organized as follows to explore how the experiential meaning is construed.

First of all, an investigation of transitivity patterns in the manuals will be carried out in order to decode the experiential meaning embodied in the corresponding process patterns. In examining the typical realization of transitivity in the manuals of household electric appliances, it is firstly required to determine what kind of process type a clause in the data belongs to, and in the following step it is to identify the frequency of occurrence of each process type. "Table I" presents the distribution of process types in the manuals of electric household appliances.

TABLE I.    DISTRIBUTION OF PROCESS TYPES IN THE MANUALS OF HOUSEHOLD ELECTRIC APPLIANCES

| Process type | material | relational | mental | existential | verbal | behavioral |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number | 596 | 154 | 29 | 11 | 6 | 1 |
| Percent | 74.78% | 19.32% | 3.64% | 1.38% | 0.75% | 0.13% |

The investigation into the transitivity patterns in the manuals reveals that the material process is dominant with the percentage of 74.78%, occupying nearly 2/3 of the total processes.

According to Huang (2001: 93), generally speaking, material processes reflect narrative meanings, while relational processes, mental processes and the others express the descriptive meanings. The distribution of process types shows the discourse is both narrative and descriptive but with the focus on the narrative meaning. The manuals instruct the user how to operate the appliance, for example, how to install, dismantle, run and maintain it. So the manuals are characteristic of many activities of doings. The process of doings plays an important role in the realization of experiential meaning in the manuals, and the other process types count for a little. The distribution indicates a leading principle in SFG: choice is meaning.

The material process is one of the most salient types of process. Material processes are processes of "doing", typically involving concrete, tangible actions and events. Eggins (1994:230) defines "the basic meaning of material process is that some entry does something, undertake some action." The functional labels for participants are Actor and Goal. Actor is the participant of "doer", the constituent of the clause who does the deed or performs the action. Goal is the participant at whom the process is directed, to whom the action is extended. Participants are realized by nominal groups.

### B. Material Processes

Material processes encode a process of doing, and express the notion that some entity does something, undertake some actions. The action is concrete, physical events or abstract doings or happenings. There are maybe two participants in material processes, one is named Actor

who does the deed or performs the acts, the other is labeled Goal whom the process is directed at, and whom the action is extended to. The typical structural configuration is Actor + Process + Goal. The material process encodes the concept of voice. Without the feature of "agency", a clause is neither active nor passive but middle; with the feature of "agency", a clause is non-middle or effective in voice. An effective clause is either active or passive. A middle clause contains only one participant, while an effective clause contains two participants, though sometimes one participant, usually Agent may be concealed.

In the data, middle voice occupies a very small proportion of clause and finds only 56 examples. There is no middle voice in Text 1. The following are some examples of middle voice in the discourse 1-11.

1. At the same time the pilot lamp will light up… (Text 3)

2. …but the rice-cooking process has not begun yet. (Text 3)

3. …and the pilot lamp will go out. (Text 3)

4. …while the water is boiling… (Text 4)

5. …failure occurred … (Text 4)

6. The hot water does not come… (Text 4)

7. When gas leaks from its container… (Text 5)

8. The sides of the refrigerator heat up. (Text 5)

9. If any case of malfunction happens … (Text 5)

10. When operation starts … (Text 6)

11. The three cycle lamps and "WOOL" program lamp all flash on and off… (Text 6)

In the clauses of middle voice, the acting or happening is often observed by the user to take place. It is found that the Medium in middle clauses is non-animate participant except one example — 12. "… so wait…"(Text 6).

The effective clause is the majority. The purpose of the manuals and the feature of the effective clause decide the distribution. Since the manuals aim at instructing the user how to operate a concrete, tangible appliance, the user should be presumed to be the doer. He should experience all the action, not just be an observer. Middle clauses involve just one participant and it cannot build a sense of connection between participants. Effective clauses include two participants, though sometimes Agent is implicit. Therefore, it is presumed that effective clauses can offer a more clear instruction.

Effective voice falls into two kinds, the active voice and the passive voice. Since either participant can become the Subject, there is a choice between active and passive. The active voice means that Process first associates with Actor, while the passive encodes that Process associates with Goal first. The choice of active or passive depends on which participant the writer intends to focus on.

In the passive voice, the Medium is made as Subject, an unmarked Theme. The examination shows that the passive clauses occupy a limited share of 22%. In Text 1, there is no the presence of the passive voice. The Medium (Subject) is inanimate, which means to present the impersonal features in the discourse. The following examples 13-23 belong to the passive voice appearing in the data.

13. When the power cord is connected with charging one directly… (Text 2)

14. …at least must be installed in the charging line. (Text 2)

15. The marks on the left are graduated by the litre. (Text 3)

16. The white switch button must be pressed down… (Text 3)

17. …it can be washed with water. (Text 3)

18. It should be repaired only by an authorized repair technician. (Text 4)

19. …if the electric plug or power cord is damaged… (Text 4)

20. Slide shelf can be stretched… (Text 5)

21. Drain pan should be cleaned at least once a year. (Text 5)

22. …each time the "PROCESS SELECT" button is pressed. (Text 6)

23. The washing machine must be placed on a level… (Text 6)

On the basis of the investigation, it is shown that most of Agent is animate and nearly all Agent (Actor) is implicit. The implicit Actor may contribute to the objectivity of the discourse.

It is undoubted that the passive clauses with the Medium as Subject can retain impersonal writing. However, considering the aim of the manuals — instructing the user how to do things, it is better to associate Process with Agent first instead of Medium, which implies that the active voice is preferred. The highlighted Agent (Actor) strengthens the sense that the user is doing the action in the actual situation, thus the user can achieve a better understanding of the instruction. It is founded that the active clauses are dominant.

In the data, the findings indicate that there are rare examples of active clauses with explicit animate Agent or explicit inanimate Agent. This may be out of the concern for the objectivity. The following are some examples 24-27.

24. This may cause a fire. (Text 1)

25. If you are going to switch the power off… (Text 6)

26. Have you unhooked and lowered the drain hose? (Text 6)

27. Are you using a narrow drain hose? (Text 6)

According to the investigation, it is concluded that the clauses of active voice without the animate Agent are predominant. The reason is that the presence of Agent makes

the discourse appear more subjective. How to counteract it? It is found that imperative clauses are applied in the majority of active clauses to smooth away the side effects of the appearance of animate Agent, as indicated in examples 28-39 cited from all the six manuals. In imperative clauses, the Subject is always omitted, which means Agent is concealed in the effective clause. What is more, imperative clauses express a kind of requirement, order. The use of imperative clauses implies that the user cannot go against the instruction; otherwise, he will encounter malfunction or danger, large or small. In this way it is emphasized that the user must follow the instruction strictly. The final care for using imperative clauses is that they contain compact and clear features, and are ideal for teaching people how to follow the instructions.

28. Unfold the handle from the body. (Text 1)

29. Never block the air intake or the air outlet. (Text 1)

30. Connect the power cord. (Text 2)

31. …insert them into the long holes … (Text 2)

32. For example, pour water into the Pan up to… (Text 3)

33. Place the Pan inside the cooker. (Text 3)

34. Use only AC 230V. (Text 4)

35. Always close the lid securely. (Text 4)

36. Fill water into the ice-making case… (Text 5)

37. Open the doors as less as possible during Power-cut. (Text 5)

38. Set the water lever to "LARGE"… (Text 6)

39. Press the button once again to stop operation temporarily. (Text 6)

The majority of the active clauses with implicit Agent reflect that the writer tries to present a kind of objective activities, and to make the message easy to understand and to follow.

## V. CONCLUSION

Experiential meaning is meanings about the world around us, the external world, things, events, etc., or internal world, thoughts, feelings, etc. Experience is the reality that we construe for ourselves by means of language (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999:3). Transitivity is applied to explore the realization of experiential organization in the manuals. The analysis reveals that the material process is the predominant process type with the percentage of 74.78%. This is because of the communicative purpose of the manuals. The manuals aim at guiding the user what to do and how to do; therefore a large number of actions are involved in the guidance. Material processes are processes of "doing" and reflect the experiential meaning in the manuals by "doing". The material process characterizes the genre of manuals.

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