

Transitivity Analysis of Emma Watson's Speech in UN in 2014

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Abstract:

Emma Watson, who was appointed as goodwill ambassador for UN women in 2014, delivered a speech in the “He for She” campaign to promote gender equality, receiving positive response from the world. Transitivity system is important in ideational function. Being a major discourse analysis model, it has been widely used in the analysis of literature and news context. Taking the transitivity system as a theoretical framework, the thesis conducts a transitivity analysis of the speech in “He for She” campaign 2014 through a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, divides the clauses of the speech into different transitivity process types, carries out qualitative analysis on the statistical data, and then verifies the feasibility and practicability of applying transitivity theory to analyze speech discourse. With the data analysis, there are some findings: Emma mainly used material processes in her speech to describe her experience objectively; through the employment of mental processes, Emma expresses her perceptions of the word “feminism” to strike a chord with audience; the speaker calls listeners’ attention to feminism by choosing appropriate types of transitive processes to significantly improve the persuasiveness of speech.

Keywords:

Emma Watson, UN Speech, Transitivity Analysis

1. Introduction

Language and human social practice are inseparable. Halliday’s Systemic-functional grammar takes the actual use of language as study object to explain how language is used. Systemic functional grammar provides a more feasible analytical tool for better appreciation of text and discourse—transitivity system. Halliday firstly applied the transitivity theory to discourse analysis in 1971. He used the theory to analyze Golding’s novel *The Inheritors*. Transitivity analysis lays great emphasis on the applied research of discourse (including spoken and written language). More and more scholars have applied transitivity analysis to various types of discourse later, especially to literary works. Public discourse is an area of particular interest to critical linguistics, which includes news reports, political speeches and so on.

Emma Watson is popular for her role as Hermione in the series movie *Harry Potter*. She graduated with honors from Brown University, one of the Ivy League universities, and established herself as a good, independent and talented actress [1]. In 2014, she was appointed as goodwill ambassador for UN women and delivered a speech in the “He for She” campaign, which was very influential. In her speech, Emma Watson called on all people, especially men, to pay attention to gender inequality, to understand the true meaning of feminism, to face up to the gender constraints and unfreedom of men and women, and to take actions. It is worth studying both the appeal of this speech shown from her delivery and discourse techniques used to win the support of the public. This paper employs the transitivity theory in Systemic-Functional Grammar to analyze the speech by dividing the clauses of the speech into different transitivity process types, to demonstrate the function of various types in the speech, and to explore the realization of ideational function of speech discourse.

Specifically, this paper tries to answer the next two questions: First, what are the distributions of transitivity process types in Emma’s speech? Second, what are the functions of the distributions of different processes in helping the speaker to convey her intentions?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Transitivity System

Halliday firstly applied the transitivity theory to discourse analysis in 1971, which was considered as setting a precedent for stylistic analysis under the guidance of transitivity system [2]. Halliday believed that the nature of language determines requirements for language, that is, the functions that language must fulfill [3]. Every culture reflects some universally meaningful meta-function in its language, namely the ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. Ideational function implies that language is used for talking about the experience of the world, including the internal world [4]. It is realized by the transitivity system which is an important part of ideational function as well as an important means of discourse analysis. The function of transitivity is to categorize the experience into several processes and point out the participants and circumstances element related to the processes [2]. In the transitivity system, there are six types, which are material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process.

Material processes are processes of ‘doing’. The ‘doer’ of material process type of action is called the actor: there is an actor in each process. In some cases, the action may be represented as affecting or ‘being done to’ a second participant: the participant is called the goal. Material process mostly involves verbs of action. Mental process are processes of ‘sensing’. The terms ‘sensor’ and ‘phenomenon’ are used for the two participants in a mental process. The ‘sensor’ is the conscious being whose feeling and thinking. The ‘phenomenon’ is what is ‘sensed’—felt and thought. There are many verbs referring to mental processes, of feeling, thinking. The verbs of mental process can be further divided as (1) perception (seeing, hearing etc.), (2) affection (liking, fearing etc.), (3) cognition (thinking, knowing, understanding etc.). Relational process is process of ‘being’, whose function is to signal the existence of the relationship. There are two distinct modes (1) attributive: ‘a is an attribute of b’;(2) identifying: ‘a is the identity of b’. This process system operates in 3 ways, thus (1) intensive: ‘x is a’;(2) circumstantial: ‘x is at a’;(3) possessive: ‘x has a’. The behavioral process is concerned with such physiological or psychological behavior

like smiling, staring, bearing, coughing and dreaming. In behavioral process, there is only one participant labeled as behavior. In a broad sense, the verbal process is the process of saying which involves several participants like speaker, receiver, verbiage and target[5]. Existential processes represent that something exists or happens, in which only one participant involved. Typically, existential clauses contain the verbs that means ‘exist’ or ‘happen’, and the main clause form is the ‘there be’ clause [6].

In realistic context, speakers often consciously adopt different processes to express different textual meanings due to the needs of communication, the subjective views on events and the influence of ideology, which may have important political and cultural significance [7]. Transitivity analysis can help readers better understand the meaning of the speech by analyzing the language skills used. The thesis adopts transitivity analysis to the study of the speech by dividing the clauses of the speech into different transitivity process types to explore the role of transitivity process selection in reflecting the ideology behind the speech.

3. Transitivity Analysis of Emma Watson’s UN Speech in 2014

3.1. Emma Watson’s UN speech in 2014

In her speech, Emma Watson spoke up for women: feminism is not just the fighting for women’s rights, but the hope that both men and women can be liberated from prejudice have more freedom and true to them. Her speech encompasses one goal and three perspectives. The goal is to let men perceive that gender equality is an issue that matters to them, and call on them to support feminism as well to help eliminate gender inequality. The speaker persuades men from three perspectives: (1) Feminism seeks freedom, social justice and efficiency for all men and women, which can be summarized as ‘He for Everyone’; (2) Men should support feminism for themselves, that is ‘He for He’; (3) Men should support feminism for women, or at least for the women they love and care about most, that is ‘He for She’ [8].

Transitivity Analysis of Emma Watson’s UN Speech in 2014

Systemic-Functional Grammar holds that choice is meaning, that is, the choice of various components in each clause has its own particular meaning. Under the guidance of the theory of Systemic-Functional Grammar, this paper classifies the selected discourse “Emma Watson’s UN speech in 2014” into the unit of clause according to the principles of classification of six processes in transitivity system. There are 164 clauses containing transitivity systems in the whole speech. The frequency and proportion of each process type in the speech are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Distribution of Six Processes in Emma’s Speech in UN.

Name of processes	Number of this process	Percentage of this process
Material	66	39.75%
Relational	48	29.51%
Mental	39	23.49%
Verbal	9	5.42%
Behavioral	2	1.2%
Existential	2	1.2%
Total	166	100%

In general, processes that express descriptive meanings are mostly relational, existential and mental, while processes that express narrative meanings are mostly material[9]. As is shown in the table, material process is the most frequently used type, followed by relational process, mental process, the behavioral process and the existential process in a descending order of the occurrence frequencies. The presentation of such results is not random or accidental, but related to the purpose and effect of speech discourse, or the function of speech. In the discourse, the verbs of relational process “become, is, have” as well as their different tenses are widely used. Emma tries to explain the concept of feminism, and explain the different relationship between men and women in terms of rights and equality. Using a number of relational process clauses, she describes how she became a feminist and properly interprets feminism and what it means to all of us with her own experiences. The wide use of the verbs of mental process also conforms to the context requirements, such as “realized, know, confused, want, were unable to, think, hate, etc.” Through the series of expression of her own perceptions on the word feminism, the development of her mental path and the public’s misunderstanding of feminism, Emma points out the necessity to change the status quo. Relational processes and mental processes account for the majority of all processes, showing that the choice of lexical and grammatical level meets the needs of content expression and is helpful to achieve the desired effect of the speech. The relatively high proportion of material processes is due to the necessity for the speaker to describe her experience objectively.

3.1.1. Material Process

The components, the arrangement and choice of language in the material process reflect the purpose and ideology that the speaker wants to convey.

Example 1 Today we are launching a campaign called for HeForShe.

Emma starts her speech with a formal call to action, using the verb “launch” to introduce the campaign that follows. Meanwhile, the use of the present continuous tense shows that feminists like Emma have been working hard for women’s rights for a long time, calling on others to get involved in the campaign and showing Emma’s determination.

Example 2 Why has the word become such an uncomfortable one?

Emma mentions here that “feminism” has always been a sensitive word due to the misconception that fighting for women’s rights means hating men. The use of the verb “become” expresses the process of the word “feminism” from being raised as a voice for women to various misinterpretations later on. The use of the present perfect tense also emphasizes that this phenomenon has existed for a long time and expresses the hope that it will change in the future. Emma Watson, an ambassador of goodwill to the United Nations and an influential young film actress, takes a gentler tone here by using a question to seek answers commonly known.

Example 3 Socially, I am afforded the same respect as men.

“afford” is used in a formal way, which fits the context of a serious and solemn speech at the United Nations. Emma uses the verb to speak up for women in a formal and serious way, calling for the same respect for women as for men. This sentence is in the passive voice, and “I”, the subject, plays an emphatic role.

Example 4 because not all women have received the same rights I have.

The word “Receive” is used in the present perfect tense, suggesting that many women are still being treated unequally. Starting from her experiences, Emma compares other women’ situation with the “right” she currently has in various social environments such as family and school, showing her sympathy for women who have no similar right. Through this comparison, she also arouses the listeners’ s sympathy and draws their attention.

3.1.2. Relational Process

The relational process is mainly used to fulfil the goal of generalization and identification. The relational process accounts for 29.51% of the whole text, which is second only to the material process in this discourse. It is also important for the realization of the speech function because the nouns used to describe a particular participant denoting characteristics play a dual role. As the name implies, the relational process aims to establish relationship. Such “relationship” can be the identification of identity or the identification of characteristics, that is, the answer to the questions of “what” and “how”. In addition, the emotional color of the speaker is also implied in the discourse of this kind of speech.

Example 5 My life is a sheer privilege.

This sentence employs “be” to realize relational process. Emma considers that she is lucky because her parents, teachers and school don’t think less of her. Ironically, although someone is not treated unfairly because of his gender, he considers his life as a kind of privilege, which causes listeners to reflect from another perspective.

Example 6 For the record, feminism by definition is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities.

Since feminism has been biased to some people as a word of hatred of men, Emma begins her speech by giving a professional and scientific definition of feminism, guiding listeners with a correct understanding of feminist thoughts, trying changing those who are prejudiced and mobilizing more to join the campaign.

Example 7 These influences were the gender equality ambassadors.

“These influences” refers to the fact that Emma’s parents, teachers have no prejudices against her because she is a girl, and have not restricted her growth. Growing up in this free environment, Emma has formed the concept of gender equality between men and women, and has gradually become a feminist. Through her constant efforts, she has been given the opportunity to be a voice for women at the United Nations. Emma also takes this opportunity to express her gratitude towards her family and teachers who have influenced her upbringing in a subtle way.

3.1.3. Mental Process

Mental process describes what you are seeing, feeling and thinking, requiring that the subject of “perception” should have consciousness. According to the following examples, Emma chose “we”, “you” and “women” as the initiators of the mental process in her speech, either referring to herself or to women who are equal to “me” and “you”. Thus, Emma hopes that people can cognitively understand what is real equality, and completely recognize the value and power of women.

Example 8: It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, instead of two sets of opposing ideals.

Emma chose the word “perceive”, which is of “cognitive” type, to call on the audience not to perceive gender relationship in terms of gender dichotomy, recognize and affirm the value of women in society cognitively, so as to treat women in a really impartial way.

Example 9: before women can expect to be paid the same as men for the same work.

The word “before” implies to the audience the social reality that some women do not get paid the same as men for the same work, which is still in existence. Emma’s use of the word “expect” shows that women have a strong desire to change this unequal situation, and that this desire is unattainable in the future. Once again, she calls on listeners to help women’s wishes come true.

Example 10: If you believe in equality, you might be one of those inadvertent feminists.

Emma’s choice of the word “believe” , which is of “cognitive” type. She calls on the audience to cognitively understand the meaning of the word “equality”, and more importantly, to root the concept of equality between men and women in their hearts and make efforts in their own actions.

3.1.4. Verbal Process

Verbal process is intermediate between material process and mental process. “Speaking” is a material process, showing inner activities. Verbs of verbal process are those such as “say, ask, point out, mention, explain, blame, tell,” etc [10]. In her speech, Emma accurately used the verbs “tell”, “speak” and “talk”.

Example 11: I applaud you.

Example 12: We don’t often talk about men.

The subject of example 11 is “I”, which refers to Emma’s thoughts. She encourages more people to get involved in fighting for women’s rights. The subject of example 12 is “we”, which indicates the attitude of all women. Using the first person shortens the distance between the speaker and the audience, thus enhances the credibility of the content.

3.1.5. Existential Process

In the speech discourse, there are two existential process clauses:

Example 13: If there is one thing I know for certain, it is that this has to stop.

Example 14: There is no one country in the world where all women can expect to see these rights.

The example 13 is Emma’s own opinion: we should regard the feminist campaign in right way. Fighting for women’s rights does not mean being hostile to men.

The example 14 is Emma’s description of the unequal treatment of women in the current society: women do the same work as men but do not get the same pay, which is an objective existence reflected by the existential process.

4. Conclusions

Emma's speech consists of three main subjects: the women, the men, and the speaker herself. Whether it is the actions that women actively take or are forced to accept in the material process, the speaker's own appeal to change the status quo of gender inequality in the mental process, or the objective social situation stated in the existential process, presents a fact to the audience: although someone has prejudiced against feminism in today's society, there are more people willing to speak up for women and join campaigns like "He for She" for gender equality.

As for the speaker herself, in the mental process clauses, Emma repeatedly makes a genuine appeal to the audience that women should have the right to participate in decision-making for their own interests. Also, men should understand what feminism really means. At the same time, the speech also contains what she has seen and heard in real life, which makes the speech more convincing and enables the tone stronger with the help of several parallel sentences (I think it is right). The relational process clauses contain the speaker's subjective evaluation of her own growth, which also conveys the speaker's hope that women can be like herself without being bound due to gender discrimination; the clauses of the verbal process directly express the speaker's firm attitude and determination to join the feminist course, which mobilizes listeners greatly.

In the whole speech text, the speaker not only uses indicative mood to describe the existing social situation, but also employs interrogative mood sentence patterns as well as two "there be" sentence patterns in the existential process, indicating the speaker's position and attitude towards feminism, and calling on the audience to participate in the movement for women's rights, hence to face up to the gender bondage and inequality, and break the shackles with actions.

The use of transitivity theory to analyze speech discourse is helpful for the audience to better understand the implication. Meanwhile, it is conducive to the exploration of the speech skills used by the speaker, so as to provide a new perspective for the interpretation of speech discourse.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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