# RESEARCH ARTICLE

## CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TRANSITIVITY IN ECONOMIC NEWS

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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Conveying changes and trends in the world economy, economic news reports have influenced readers' attitudes of specific economic activities. Based on transitivity theory of Systemic-Functional Grammar, this paper makes a qualitative and quantitative research of the composition of six processes of transitivity in the BBC Economic News "*China' s debt mountain: Should we worry?*", aiming to explore the ideology behind it and their attitudes towards China's economy.

## INTRODUCTION

It has been solidly confirmed and widely accepted by the academic circle and the general public that the only feature that makes the human being different from all the animals is that we can communicate in language with each other. Language is an integral part of our life, but it has always been neglected or taken for granted. Some people simply regard language as a tool for access to other fields of knowledge rather than as a research subject in itself. However, it is indeed necessary to consider carefully how much we really understand language and its role in our life. To some extent, our language is like a mirror, reflecting the particular ways in which we perceive the world we live in and our understanding of what is going on. Therefore, the essential task of language researchers is to polish this social mirror so as to reveal the reality of the world by interpreting. The present study adopts a descriptive approach to investigate the relationship between language and society. Language is alive only in society and only when it is put into use can it have meanings. Specifically, texts of news in mass media are chosen as materials for analysis. News is generally considered to be impartial and objective, informing people of what is really happening in the world they live in. News conveys condensed information to a considerable number of readers every day. However, news editorials not only monitor the events of the real world, but also construct representations and accounts of reality.

News reports present facts in a way that is designed to arouse the reader's interest and curiosity and exert heavy impact on readers' attitude towards the events. Nevertheless, news is not the real event itself, but rather the product of a series of selection and transformation of a realistic event, and in this way, it can shape the readers' perception of reality. As a means of disseminating instant messages, news reflects all aspects of human life. News language has become an important style because of its unique form and characteristics. Nowadays, with the acceleration of economic globalization, economic news reports not only convey the changes and trends of the world economy, but also affect the readers' attitudes towards a particular economic relation or a specific economic activity. Economic news, with its unique perspective, shows people the specific ideology that lies in their language. In recent years, the majority of domestic scholars have paid their attention to political news, in order to explore the international political tendency as well as the attitudes of foreign media towards China's different policies. However, few researchers have carried out on the economic news reports. Therefore, this paper is going to focus on the economic news. Based on transitivity theory of Systemic-Functional Grammar, this paper makes a qualitative and quantitative research of the composition of six processes of transitivity in the BBC Economic News "*China' s debt mountain: Should we worry?*", aiming to explore the ideology behind it and their attitudes towards the domestic economic development.

**Literature Review**

**Studies on News Discourse:** News can be translated as tidings; the source of news information can be newly happened

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occurrences. As discourse, according to different content, linguistically named, Van Dijk (1988:27) classifies the news into five types, which can be interpreted as "subject-matter" (Halliday, 1978). These five types are political and law news, economic news, culture, education and sanitation news, sports news and society news. There are many different definitions of news discourse. Some scholars claim that news is the newly happened event that can capture receivers' attention. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English with Chinese Translation* gives a definition of news as new or fresh information, reports of what has most recently happened. All of the above all emphasize that news is used as an informative representation of social reality. Roger Fowler (1979:85) gives a definition of news: news is not natural phenomenon energy straight from "reality", but a product. It is produced by an industry, by the relations between the media and other industries and, most importantly, by relations with the government and other political organizations. From a broader perspective, it reflects, an in return shapes the prevailing values of a society in a particular historical context.

Van Dijk is considered one of the most important researchers in studying news discourse. In his book *New as Discourse* (1988), he has made an important study of news discourse and his study to define the notion of news discourse is important. Van Dijk (1988:5) proposes three kinds of news concepts in everyday usage. First is new information about events, things or person; second is program type in which news items are presented; the last one which is his study focus is a news item or news report in which new information is given about the recent events. That's to say, "it's a type of text or discourse as it is expressed, used, or made public in news media or public information carriers such as TV, radio and the newspaper" (Van Dijk, 1988:16). The definition of news still remains ambiguous. To avoid ambiguity, Van Dijk (1988) proposes to use the term "news discourse" and mentions that "news discourse about past political, social, or cultural events. This excludes at least all text types that have a programmatic nature, although it does not yet rule out reviews of performance or editor." According to him, a real definition of a news discourse in the paper requires an extensive and explicit theoretical description of structures (both formal and semantic), uses, and functions.

**Studies on Economic News Text:** English economic news discourse studies the discourse which is concerned with the economic affairs including the latest economic changes, commercial events and economic phenomena. The researchers always take the news reports of finance, trade, recession and the economic tendency as research materials, which are not considered ideology-loaded. As Wang Huaqing (2003) defines: English economic news discourse is the kind of news which reports on all economic activities of human society or news which takes the economic activities as its main content. Economic activities include economic construction, economic reform, economic life etc. Economic news is concerned with the reports on the happenings, in the field of social production. Economic news is the news which reflects, leads and provides services for social economic activities and the economic life of human beings. English economic news discourse tells stories which happen in the economic field and usually gives the accurate figures or indexes to the public. Subjects of the data in economic reports involve the national economic growth, business reports of companies, various indexed, exchange rates

of the currencies, etc. The contents of the reports in this field require more factual and accurate reports rather than giving comments and opinions. With the development of market-oriented economy, economic news takes more important role in the press and gains more and more attention. Economic news has not only the typical features of news but also the unique features of its own. Zhang Meiling (2008) proposes the linguistic features of economic news from four aspects. Firstly, there are more graphic charts than reports such as culture news, etc, which are used to describe and explain the paragraph followed. Secondly, the reports seem more coherent by the use of lexical cohesive chain. Thirdly, lots of adjectives and adverbs which can reflect different grade tendencies are used. Fourthly, terminologies are largely used to make the reports more professional. The features of English economic news discourse are as follows. The first is the title of English economic news discourse's feature. As a kind of news, English economic news discourse should follow the principle of precision, concision and clarity, which also are applied to the title of economic news. Precision and clarity are the essential condition of news and guarantee the truth of the news. In order to raise the artistic quality of the abstract economic news, the concision of title is important. Second, as the medium of information dissemination, the use of lexical in English economic news discourse is brief but detailed. To fit in with the development and change of world, neologism is applied in the English economic news discourse. Third, according to the analysis of corpus, metaphor is a major figure of speech in the title.

**Previous Studies on Transitivity in News Reports:** Transitivity method to discourse analysis abroad dates back to the early 1970s, Halliday made the earliest and most influential application of transitivity system in the text analysis of William Golding's novel *The Inheritors* (Halliday, 1971). Through analyzing the three passages selected from each section of the novel, Halliday found how different selections of process types can suggest the shift in thinking styles and world views. He considered that all linguistic choices are meaningful and stylistic (Leech and Short, 2001). Fowler (1991:16) says, "The best model for examining the connections between linguistic structure and social values is the functional model developed by Halliday and his colleagues." In contrast to the more influential Chomskian linguistic tradition, SFG is profoundly concerned with the relationship between language and other elements and aspects of social life, and its approach to the linguistic analysis of texts is always oriented to the social character of texts (Fairclough, 2003). A wide variety of registers has come under scrutiny within the critical linguistic perspective. News reports have received particular attention. Furthermore, much of the work concerned with news reporting has made extensive use of different versions of the transitivity model as a means of uncovering ideological viewpoint through an examination of linguistic structure. For example, Montgomery (1986) focused on conflicting news coverage of a serious industrial dispute between striking miners and the British government from 1984 to 1985. In China, most linguists also conducted a transitivity study to interpret and criticize literary works, to reveal their stylistic features, and prove transitivity model is powerful in analyzing the characterization and theme of literary works. Zhu Shichang (1995) made a comparative analysis of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* to probe the transitivity system embodied in the two novels.

**Table 1. Distribution of different types of processes in sample news**

|            | Material process | Mental process | Relational process | Behavior process | Verbal process | Existential process |
|------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Number     | 23               | 1              | 17                 | 0                | 2              | 0                   |
| Percentage | 53.5%            | 2.3%           | 39.5%              | /                | 4.7%           | /                   |

On one hand, the different choices of processes of transitivity reflect the two authors' diverse attitudes towards the society that they lived in respectively. On the other hand, both mental and material processes were employed to show the psychological and behavioral dynamics of the characters. Yu Weishen (1998) carried out a research on James Joyce's short novel *Eveline*. In his study, he discovered that transitivity analysis is most apt for the analysis of relations between conflicting parties. He also demonstrated some preliminary studies on transitivity analysis of literary works to illustrate his statement. Shen Dan (2006) initiated a quest to uncover the deeper symbolic importance of different language features of *On the Road* and made an assertion that transitivity analysis was useful to understand the complex relationship between the real author and the implied one. Despite the fact that with further research, ideology and power relations have come into the vision of linguists, a few of them adopted transitivity as a tool to reveal the tacit ideology and power relations. Researchers using transitivity system in critical discourse analysis are definitely in the minority. Transitivity was applied mainly in the analysis of literary works and some other genres of discourse. On one hand, these surveys provide many important linguistic clues to identify types of text and contribute much to its analysis in linguistic field. On the other hand, a few of these researchers who adopted transitivity as the analytical tool with taking news or editorial discourse as the object of their study to unfold the concealed ideology and power relations. Even so, political and social news reports were mainly the focus of their researches. Economic news did not attract much attention.

**Theoretical Framework**

Originated from the Critical Linguistics which was created by the linguists from University of East Anglia in the late 1970s, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has played an important role in discourse analysis. Represented by Fowler, Critical Linguistics follows the analytical traditions of linguistics and stylistics, which focuses on the analysis of the language components in discourse on the basis of the theoretical framework of Halliday's Systemic-Functional linguistics. From the beginning of the 1990s, the critical discourse analysis, represented by Fairclough, not only relies on the theories of Systemic-Functional linguistics, but also based on the theories of sociology and ideological criticism, aiming to reveal the ideology hidden in the discourse. Fairclough (1985) argued that discourse is a whole of three dimensions: text, discourse practice and social practice. Text is the product of discourse practice; discourse practice includes the process of discourse generation and interpretation; and those two dimensions are all constrained and influenced by social practice. As the main theoretical basis of critical discourse analysis, the systemic-functional linguists believe that language, as a tool of human communication, has a variety of functions. Halliday has divided meta-functions of language into three categories: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. Ideational function serves for the expression of "content": that is, of the speaker's experience of

the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness. Within this, the experiential subfunction is concerned with the expression of processes, participants in those processes, circumstances, qualities and the like; the logical subfunction provides for the linguistic expression of such universal relations as those of "and", "or", negation and implication. Transitivity is an essential semantic system in the experiential subfunction, which specifies the different types of process expressed in the clause and is the main analytical method used in the discourse analysis. Halliday has classified experiences into six types of processes in English transitivity system, which are material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process, and existential process. Material process is the process of doing. This process is generally expressed by a dynamic verb, such as *run*, *paint*, *make*, etc. The Actor (logical subject), and Goal (logical direct object) are generally expressed by noun, such as *paper*, *water*, or pronoun, such as *she*, *it*. If a material process has both the Actor and the Goal, the Voice of the clause that contains the process can be either active or passive. But if there is no Goal in the process, then the clause can only be active. Material process can reflect not only concrete motions, but also abstract behavior. Mental process is a process that expresses the process of sensing, such as perception, reaction, cognition, etc. Verbs that express perceptions are *see*, *feel*, *smell*, and so on. Verbs that express reactions are *hate*, *miss* and so on. Verbs that express cognition are *trust*, *learn*, *doubt* and so on. For most of the time, there are two participants in a mental process, which are a Senser that is the subject of this mental process and a Phenomenon that is the object being sensed. The Senser of mental process is usually a person, or a personalized animal. The Phenomenon of a mental process can be a particular person, a concrete item, an abstract thing, or a event that has already take place.

Relational process is the process that expresses the relations between things, that is, the process of being. The relation between things can be divided into two classes - attributive and identifying. Attributive relation processes express what kind of attributes an entity has, or which category an entity belongs to. Attributive relation and identifying relation can both be further divided into three classes: intensive, circumstantial, and possessive. For attributive relations, intensive relation is relation of membership; circumstantial relation is the relation of entity and environmental factors like time or place; and possessive relation is the relation of ownership. Of all the above relational processes, they all have an "Attribute", a "Carrier" of the attribute, and a verb noting the relation such as *have*, *is*, etc. For identifying relations, intensive relation is the specification of an entity by another entity, which has an "Identifier" and an "Identified". Circumstantial relation is the connection of two entities by environmental factors like time, place, and condition. Behavior process is a process of behaving, such as cry, dream, listen, breath, etc. Similar to mental process, there is only one behaver in behavior process and it is a human. It is a little bit difficult to distinguish a behavior process from a material process that has only one participant. It depends on whether

the process has something to do with physiology. If there are two participants in a behavior process, it can also be viewed as a material process. Verbal Process is the process of exchanging information by communication. In other words, it is the process of saying. Common verb used in verbal process are *say*, *talk*, *shout*, *explain*, etc. The Sayer of the verbal process is not necessarily a human being. It can be an animated item. And there is a Receiver of the Verbiage. Verbiage refers to the information that Sayer wants to tell the Receiver or something that the Sayer wants the Receiver to do. Existential process expresses the existence of something. Common verb used in this process are *is*, *exist*, etc. In every existential process, there must be an Existent. The core element of systemic grammar is a table of a series of options available for making a sentence, with a specification of the relations between options. Halliday argues that transitivity as a system of options functioning in clauses provides a choice between "intensive" and "extensive". If the intensive option is selected, a choice comes into play between "descriptive" and "effective"; if "effective" is chosen, there is a further distinction between "operative" and "receptive".

**Research Design**

This paper has taken the news report about Chinese economy in BBC website on May 25, 2017 "*China's debt mountain: Should we worry?*" as the research object, and the corpus is about 700 words. Because of the small capacity of the text, this research takes the method of artificial labeling. First of all, the clauses are classified into six processes of transitivity, and their compositions are counted. Then the special words used in the news report are analyzed to explore the ideology behind it. Finally, the views and attitudes that foreign media towards China's economy are concluded.

**Transitivity Analysis of Economic News**

According to Halliday, human experience can be divided into six different processes through transitivity systems, that is, material process, mental process, relational process, behavior process, verbal process and existential process. As shown in Table 1, in the news "*China's debt mountain: Should we worry?*", there are 23 clauses used material process, accounting for 53.5%; followed by relational process, which accounts for 39.3%. Verbal process and mental process follow up, which take up only 4.7% and 2.3% separately; and behavior process and existential process are not used in this piece of news.

**Material Process:** Material processes are processes of *doing*, which is expressed by dynamic verb. As this process is usually an objective description of events, the use of it can give readers an objective and realistic impression; therefore, it always take up a large proportion in the news report. In the sample news, there are 23 clauses used material process, accounting for 53.5%, which is more than other processes and in line with the objective characteristics of the news. Those material process clauses are mainly used to show the situation of China's increasing debt, that is, although the debt is within the controllable range, it still need to be vigilant and to do early warning and preventive measures.

In the news report "*China's debt mountain: Should we worry?*", the material process clauses are mainly used to describe China's debt situation in recent years, for example:

- China's own finance ministry has warned that some local authorities are struggling to meet day-to-day operating costs.
- They find themselves caught between supporting often inefficient local businesses - making steel, for example.
- When China announced weaker-than-expected economic data at the beginning of 2016, world stock markets went into free fall and commodity prices tumbled.

These clauses have described the situation of China's bonds, but it gives the reader a debt-building image of China, which is not in line with facts. In the above Example 1, the obligatory actor is China's finance ministry, and the process (warned) is to warn the local government which cannot maintain their daily expenses. It seems to elaborate a fact, but using China's own finance ministry as the actor have created a phenomenon that China worries about its own debt very much. Example 2 is still raised from the perspective of China, revealing the situation that the government support the poorly managed enterprises. But the author used the word "caught", which means "fall into or be lost in", constructing an illusion that China's local government has been firmly lost in the dilemma caused by these insolvent enterprises. Example 3 elaborate a situation of last year, that is, when China announced weaker-than-expected economic data, world stock markets went into free fall and commodity prices tumbled. The way that the author elaborate the situation has made the reader inevitably link the two facts together, and have the idea that "world stock markets went into free fall and commodity prices tumbled" is caused by the slow development of China's economy. Objectively speaking, this news report has used more material process, which shows that the author tries to reflect the the objectivity and authenticity of the incident, but also in line with the characteristics of news reports. However, in the selection of words and discourse arrangement, the news still has a certain subjective ideology, which constructs an image that China is under a heavy debt.

**Relational Proces:** Relational processes are processes of *being*, focusing on the meaning of description. The central meaning of clauses of this type is that something is. It includes two categories, that is, "attributive" and "identifying". In the attributive mode, an attribute is ascribed to some entity; or it refers to which type an entity belongs to. This process is also often used in the news reports to present the relationships between characters and the development of incident, or to establish the relationship between two events and make it a reality. For example:

- This Mr King is senior economic adviser at HSBC, and a China expert.
- Now, the rating is still A1 - the agency's fifth highest.
- Its foreign currency reserves stand at more than $3tn and its annual current account surplus is $200bn.
- And Moody's downgrade is just one straw in the wind.

In this piece of news, relational process clauses almost belong to attributive mode, which are used to illustrate the characteristics of China's debt at this stage. In Example 4, Mr. King is the writer of American bestseller *Grave New World*. In the first sentence of the news, the author quotes the description of China in Stephen King's book "For better or worse, China is just too big to be ignored." to illustrate the importance of

China, which means to the world economy, China still has a pivotal position. It emphasizes that Mr. King is a senior economic adviser at HSBC and a China expert in order to evaluate China from a professional perspective and to make the news objective. However, in the book *Grave New World*, Stephen King believes that the world power is constantly moving from west to east, which makes the United States and Europe no longer have free trade and global integration; in particular, it is found that the economic development of some emerging markets, such as China, is more successful than Europe and the United States. The author has stressed the China's growing economic position in the world when he explained China's debt, which has increased readers' concerns about China's debt situation. The author has not only pointed out China's economic debt to the world, but also affirmed the current development of China's economy, for example in Example 5, 6 and 7. Although the credit rating has been downgraded in the latest credit assessment (from Aa3 to A1), China still has strong economic power. Its foreign currency reserves stand at more than $3tn and its annual current account surplus is $200bn. Based on these, the author explains that debt sustainability is not a near and present danger for China; at the same time, the author also holds the idea that downgrading is just one straw in the wind, that is, the current stage is still steady, but still need to be vigilant. Relational process is used to present the relationships between people and events in the news and make them convincing. Although the author has cited the views of the authority and the specific data as evidence, the news is inevitably adding the author's personal ideology, that is, although at this stage Chinese economy can be developed smoothly and affect the pattern of the world economy, its prospect is still not optimistic and cannot be taken lightly.

**Other Processes:** Verbal processes are processes of *saying*; and the verbs they usually use are *say,tell*, *talk*, *praise*, *describe* etc. In the news reports, the author often cites the views and sayings of authority to enhance the credibility of the news reports. For example:

- In his new book Grave New World, Stephen King says: "For better or worse, China is simply too big to be ignored."
- Writing about the country's economic slowdown in 2012, he said: "China's debt fuelled expansion was never likely to be sustainable."

In the news report "*China's debt mountain: Should we worry?*", there are only two verbal process clauses, which are quoted from Stephen King's book *Grave New World*. The author has illustrated his own idea from the perspective of authority, that is, China's debt-driven economy is difficult to maintain, although it can develop steadily at this stage; there is always a big risk. As mentioned above, the book *Grave New World* holds a negative attitude towards the development of the Orient economy. It believes that the eastern countries, including China who is a economic giant, do not have long-term economic potential, although the world power is constantly moving eastward. Therefore, it seems an authoritative statement by quoting the view of senior economic adviser at HSBC; in fact, it reveals the distrust of western countries to the development of Chinese economy. Mental processes are processes of *sensing* - feeling, thinking and perceiving; and the verbs they usually use are *see*, *look*, *like*,

*believe* etc. The expression of this process is much more subjective, which often gives the reader a feeling of unreal; therefore, it is seldom used in the news report. In the sample news, there is only one clause used mental process, accounting for 2.3%, which is in line with the characteristics of objectivity. This clause appears at the end of the news, expressing the author 's writing intention, that is, "there is no need to rush for the lifeboats yet; however, it's probably worth knowing where they are." Behavior processes are processes of physiological and psychological behavioral, like breathing, dreaming, smiling, coughing. Grammatically they are intermediate between material and mental processes. And existential processes represented that something exists or happens as in *there was a picture on the wall*, which typically have the verb *be* or some other verb expressing existence, such as *exist* and *arise*. These two kinds of processes are both static processes, which are seldom used in the news reports. And in the sample news, they are not used at all.

**Conclusion**

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, it is found that the distribution of the six processes of transitivity in the economic news is extremely uneven, that is, material process and relational process are dominant, combining with verbal process and mental process, while behavioral process and existential process are not used at all. Such a distribution is in line with the news features which require truth and reliability. However, in the selection of words and discourse arrangement, concerns and worries about the further development of China's economy from western countries still can be seen. Today, with the development of economic globalization, all countries are looking for their own economic shelter to prevent further impact from other countries' economic crises. At present, China's economy is faced with a series of urgent problems, but it can still maintain stable development. Therefore, we should take a positive view of the problems in China's economic development and seek solutions. The most important is that the reader should not be influenced by the western ideology hidden in the news reports.

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