

EXPERIENTIAL MEANINGS IN THE NEW YORK TIMES COMMENTARIES ON THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT: A TRANSITIVITY APPROACH

NGUYEN THI THU HIEN* - HA THANH HAI** - VO DUY DUC***

ABSTRACT: This study analyzes experiential meaning in commentaries on the Russia-Ukraine conflict based on Systemic Functional Grammar. The research combines both qualitative and quantitative analysis of data drawn from the clauses of ten commentaries published in *The New York Times* in 2024. The results indicate that with the predominance of Material processes, the commentaries focus on presenting what is happening in society and the actions taken by authorities, organizations, or experts in response to the ongoing conflict. The Verbal process ranks second in frequency, contributing to illustrating the reliability of the information conveyed by individuals, organizations, or experts discussing the situation and events surrounding the conflict. The Relational process is also employed to explain and expand concepts, helping to clarify the context of the events and the severity of the conflict. Although less frequent, Mental, Existential, and Behavioral processes still help articulate the depth of cognition and enhance the rhetorical credibility of the news commentary.

KEY WORDS: Systemic Functional Grammar; commentaries; experiential meaning; Russia-Ukraine conflict.

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1. Introduction

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how meaning is constructed through language in everyday communication. Central to this approach is the view that language functions are inseparable from meaning-making processes, with semantics forming the foundation of communication. Halliday (1994) identifies three metafunctions in Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)—the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions—each of which plays a vital role in the construction and interpretation of meaning. Among these, the ideational function, particularly its experiential dimension, is concerned with how language represents human experiences.

A significant body of research has applied SFG to explore these metafunctions across various discourse genres, including newspaper discourse. These studies reveal the diverse ways in which journalists construct representations of the world, shaped by the particular issues and events they report on. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) posit that language serves as a "theory of human experience," facilitating the transformation of experiential phenomena into structured meanings (p. 30). They refer to these as *experiential meanings*, which are construed through language as sequences of events or actions (p. 213).

Within this theoretical perspective, *transitivity* plays a central role, functioning as a grammatical system that allows speakers to model reality and make sense of their external and internal worlds. Through transitivity, language encodes actions, events, perceptions, thoughts, and existential states, offering a lens through which discourse can be systematically interpreted. As such, transitivity analysis has become a key tool in studies investigating the nature of language use across a wide range of genres—including political rhetoric, literary narratives, religious texts, and medical discourse.

Despite a growing body of literature on the transitivity system in media texts (e.g., Bednarek, 2006), few studies have focused specifically on English news commentaries from the perspective of

*Quy Nhon University; Email: nguyenthithuhien@qnu.edu.vn

_*Quy Nhon University

experiential meaning. Works by Youssefi et al. (2013), Meltarina (2019), and Julia et al. (2012), for example, illustrate how transitivity analysis can uncover embedded ideologies and power relations in news discourse. However, there remains a notable gap in the application of this framework to news commentaries addressing international diplomatic conflicts. The present study addresses this gap by examining the representation of the Russia–Ukraine conflict in English news commentaries through the transitivity system of SFG.

This study aims to explore how the Russia–Ukraine conflict is depicted in ten commentaries published by *The New York Times* in 2024. Specifically, it investigates the process types and corresponding participants employed by commentators, with the objective of uncovering the experiential meanings encoded in the discourse. To achieve this, the research was conducted in two stages: first, identifying and classifying the process types and participant roles in the data; second, analyzing the frequency and function of these processes to interpret the experiential meanings constructed. A qualitative approach guided the identification and analysis of transitivity structures, while quantitative methods were applied to calculate the distribution of process types, enabling a more nuanced discussion of dominant linguistic patterns and their implications for representing the conflict.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Overview of Systemic Functional Grammar

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), developed by Michael Halliday, is a descriptive framework that emphasizes the functionality of language in social contexts. As a component of Systemic Functional Linguistics, which adopts a social semiotic view of language, SFG posits that linguistic structures are shaped by communicative needs. The term "systemic" refers to the notion of language as a set of interrelated systems of meaning-making choices, while "functional" underscores the view that language evolved to fulfill specific social functions.

According to Halliday (1994), language reflects the complexity of human experience and interaction. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) categorize the primary functions of language into three metafunctions. The *ideational metafunction* (subdivided into logical and experiential functions) allows speakers to represent the world around and within them, encoding actions, events, and entities. The *interpersonal metafunction* facilitates interaction, enabling speakers to express attitudes, establish social roles, and influence others. The *textual metafunction* concerns the organization of information within a coherent discourse, enabling the integration of ideational and interpersonal meanings into structured texts.

The current study concentrates on the experiential component of the ideational metafunction, specifically examining how language constructs human experiences through the transitivity system.

2.2. The Transitivity System

The transitivity system represents the grammatical realization of experiential meaning in language. It reflects how speakers encode their experiences of reality by selecting from different process types and participant roles (Halliday, 1994; Eggins, 2004). Transitivity involves the configuration of three key elements: the *process* (the central verb or action), *participants* (entities involved in the process), and *circumstances* (additional details specifying time, place, manner, etc.).

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) classify processes into six primary types, as summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. Types of process in transitivity system (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004)

Process type	Category meaning	Participants
Material:	‘Doing’	Actor, Goal
Action	Doing	‘Behaver’
Event	‘Happening’	
Behavioral:	‘Behaving’	
Mental:	‘Sensing’	
Perception	‘Seeing’	Senser
Affection	‘Feeling’	Phenomenon
Cognition	‘Thinking’	
verbal:	‘Saying’	Sayer, target
Relational:	‘Being’	Token, value
Attribution	‘Attributing’	Carrier, attribute
Identification	‘Identifying’	Identified, identi
Existential:	‘Existing’	Existent

Each process type serves to construct a particular aspect of human experience and is realized through distinct syntactic and semantic patterns. By analyzing the distribution and use of these processes in news commentaries, researchers can gain insights into how journalists represent the conflict, its actors, and its broader significance.

A process in the transitivity system is composed of three fundamental elements: the process itself (typically realized through the verb), the participants involved (the entities engaged in or affected by the process), and the circumstances (providing additional information about time, manner, location, cause, etc.). Among the six types of processes identified in Systemic Functional Grammar, *Material*, *Mental*, and *Relational* processes are generally the most prominent, while *Behavioral*, *Verbal*, and *Existential* processes also contribute to the nuanced representation of experience.

These process types function to categorize and articulate the wide array of human experiences that language can express. Through the analysis of transitivity patterns within texts, it becomes possible to explore the *field* component of the situational context—that is, the nature of the activity or subject matter being discussed. The clause, as the basic unit of ideational meaning, structures these experiences in a form that can be interpreted and analyzed.

However, this study is limited to the analysis of **processes** and their associated **participants** as indicators of *experiential meaning*. Circumstantial elements, while significant in a full transitivity analysis, fall outside the scope of the present investigation and are therefore not addressed in this paper.

3. Processes and Experiential Meanings in *The New York Times* Commentaries

The dataset comprises a total of 378 clause complexes extracted from ten English-language news commentaries addressing the Russia–Ukraine conflict, all published by *The New York Times* in 2024. From these, a subset of 291 independent clauses was identified and subjected to detailed transitivity analysis. *Embedded clauses* and *reported clauses* were excluded from consideration, as their function is primarily to modify or report rather than to directly construct experiential meaning. Additionally, *dependent clauses* were treated as single functional units within the transitivity framework, following established analytical conventions.

3.1. Overview of Process Types in *The New York Times* Commentaries

The frequency distribution of the six process types identified across the 291 independent clauses is presented in Table 2 (see below). This distribution provides insight into the linguistic strategies employed by news commentators to represent the conflict, and serves as the basis for interpreting the dominant experiential meanings encoded in the texts.

Table 2. Process Types in The New York Times Commentaries

Process Types	Frequency of Occurrence	Percentage (%)
Material	136	46.7%
Verbal	89	30.5%
Relational	43	14.7%
Mental	17	5.9%
Existential	4	1.4%
Behavioural	2	0.8%
Total	291	100%

Table 2 presents a quantitative summary of transitivity processes identified in the data. Material processes are the most prevalent, comprising 136 instances or 46.7% of all processes. These are followed by Verbal processes with 89 occurrences (30.5%), Relational processes at 14.7%, and Mental processes at 5.9%. In contrast, Existential and Behavioral processes appear infrequently, accounting for only 1.4% and 0.8%, respectively. The data suggest that Material and Verbal processes are the preferred choices in The New York Times commentaries on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, reflecting a predominant focus on external actions and communicative events.

The dominant use of Material processes underscores the commentaries' emphasis on narrating real-world events, actions, and consequences within the conflict. This suggests a strong orientation toward objective reporting of warfare, damage, and military strategies. The substantial proportion of Verbal processes indicates that information is frequently conveyed through citations or statements from political figures, officials, and institutional voices—emphasizing the role of attributed speech in constructing reliability and credibility. Relational processes, occupying the third-highest frequency, are typically employed to provide explanatory content and define key elements of the conflict. Meanwhile, Mental, Existential, and Behavioral processes are marginally represented, indicating that inner thoughts, existential assertions, and behavioral observations are not the primary concern of these texts.

3.2. Material Processes

Material processes, which represent actions and events in the physical world, involve participants such as Actors, Goals, and Beneficiaries. These processes frequently depict military operations, destruction, and institutional actions. Clause Ex1 is an example of Material Process

Ex1: So many Ukrainians have lost not just their homes but their entire communities.

In the clause the verb phrase “have lost” functions as the Material process, with “So many Ukrainians” serving as the Actor and “not just their homes but their entire communities” as the Goal. The present perfect aspect implies a continuous impact, suggesting an ongoing state of loss and devastation. This clause highlights the human cost of war, moving beyond tangible destruction to encompass the breakdown of community and identity.

An examination of participant roles reveals that Actors are primarily represented by Ukrainian and Russian military forces, international organizations, government entities, and civilians. These 129 occurrences of Actors reflect the active involvement of multiple stakeholders in the conflict. Goals (117 instances) largely consist of military targets, infrastructure, and strategic figures, suggesting a deliberate focus on outcomes and consequences of military operations.

Beneficiaries (81 instances), such as armed forces, civilians, and governments, appear in contexts where actions are undertaken for their advantage, especially in receiving aid or territorial control.

Ex2. Decisions by President Biden and others give Ukrainian forces several new options

The clause *Ex2* illustrates a Material process where “Ukrainian forces” is the Beneficiary. The implication is that political decisions translate into actionable support on the ground. This structural pattern reflects the interplay between political strategy and military outcomes.

Overall, Material processes in the data foreground external actions and their tangible effects, highlighting the centrality of physical engagement and intervention in shaping the narrative of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

3.3. Verbal Processes

Verbal processes, characterized by verbs of saying such as “say,” “add,” and “report,” comprise the second most frequent process type. These processes typically include the Sayer, Verbiage as in *Ex3*, and occasionally a Receiver or a Target.

Ex3: Analysts say Russia is likely to increase its gains in coming months.

The clause *Ex3* demonstrates the use of a Verbal process where “Analysts” functions as the Sayer and “Russia is likely to increase its gains...” as the Verbiage. The clause attributes predictions to a specific source, which enhances the intentional objectivity of the commentary writer. Verbal processes serve to anchor information within expert or institutional discourse, ensuring journalistic neutrality and accountability.

Political leaders such as President Zelensky, President Putin, and other high-profile figures frequently appear as Sayers, emphasizing their role in shaping discourse. Statements from government officials and representatives of international bodies further contribute to the authoritative tone of the commentaries.

Receivers are often implicit but can be inferred as the general public or relevant stakeholders, underlining the informative and persuasive functions of news discourse.

Ex4: Saturday’s attack, Mr. Zelensky added, underscored Ukraine’s recent calls on Western allies to provide it with air defense systems and other weapons capable of shooting down Russian missiles and the planes that launch the bombs.

In the clause, “Saturday’s attack, Mr. Zelensky added, underscored Ukraine’s recent calls...”, the verbal process “added” introduces a significant commentary from the Ukrainian president, reinforcing urgency and legitimizing Ukraine’s defense appeals. The Verbiage in most instances addresses military activities, strategic decisions, and international cooperation, which demonstrates the media’s function in mediating public understanding of geopolitical developments.

3.4. Relational Processes

Relational processes, which account for 14.7% of the total, are used to establish identities, attributes, or circumstances. These are further categorized into intensive, possessive, and circumstantial types, each of which may appear in either attributive mode (eg. *Ex5*) or identifying one (eg. *Ex6*)

Ex5: They include more than a dozen targets based in China.

Ex6: The apparent assassination plot is just the latest in a series of attempted or successful attacks on Ukrainian figures.

The clause *Ex5* exemplifies a circumstantial relational process. The verb “include” relates the subject to specific geopolitical elements, emphasizing scale and relevance. Meanwhile, the clause *Ex6* “The apparent assassination plot is just the latest in a series...”, reflects an identifying relational process. Here, the clause categorizes the plot as part of a larger pattern of events, thereby contextualizing individual incidents within the broader conflict.

These processes function primarily to classify, define, and relate entities, helping readers understand the complexity of the situation. The frequent use of relational processes underscores the explanatory purpose of news commentaries and their role in framing the significance of developments.

3.5. Mental Processes

Mental processes, though relatively limited (5.9%), play a key role in expressing psychological and perceptual reactions. These processes involve a *Senser* (experiencer of the mental act) and a *Phenomenon* (the experienced entity). Four subtypes are evident: perceptive, cognitive, desiderative, and emotive.

The following clause illustrates a perceptive process:

Ex7: Many citizens saw the airstrikes as further evidence of the Kremlin's effort to eradicate Ukrainian culture.

In Ex7, the *Senser* “many citizens” perceives the *Phenomenon* “the airstrikes” as indicative of broader intentions, thus reflecting evaluative judgment. Such clauses often signal a perspective or emotional stance, reinforcing the human dimension of the conflict.

3.6. Existential and Behavioral Processes

Existential and Behavioral processes are the least frequent in the dataset, comprising only 1.4% and 0.8%, respectively. Existential processes, introduced by forms such as “there is” or “there was,” are typically used to mark presence or absence in a given context as in Ex8

Ex 8: ...but there wasn't much left.

The clause expresses the extent of destruction through absence, invoking a bleak image of Marinka, a small town in Ukraine, post-attack.

Behavioral processes, which bridge the mental and material domains, describe physiological or psychological actions.

Ex9: U.S. officials are watching closely for any signs that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia might try to annex the territory.

The behavioral clause Ex9 “U.S. officials are watching closely...” captures an ongoing act of observation, with “U.S. officials” as the *Behaver* and “for any signs...” as the *Phenomenon*. Though infrequent, such process suggests vigilance of U.S. officials.

The six process types identified—Material, Verbal, Relational, Mental, Existential, and Behavioral—highlight the experiential meanings embedded in commentaries on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The dominance of Material and Verbal processes suggests a discourse grounded in action and authoritative communication. Relational processes provide conceptual clarity, while Mental, Existential, and Behavioral processes—though less frequent—enrich the discourse with perspective, presence, and observation.

4. Conclusion

This transitivity-based analysis reveals that the experiential meaning in The New York Times commentaries is predominantly constructed through Material and Verbal processes. These are instrumental in conveying real-world actions and speech from credible sources, thereby shaping public awareness and understanding of the conflict. Relational processes support this by offering clarity and explanatory depth, while Mental processes introduce cognitive evaluations and perceptions. Though marginal, Existential and Behavioral processes contribute to the representation of absence, presence, and vigilance. Collectively, these findings illustrate how transitivity resources are employed to narrate, explain, and frame the Russia-Ukraine war in global media discourse.

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**Nghĩa kinh nghiệm trong các bài bình luận trên The New York Times
về xung đột Nga - Ukraina: Phân tích chuyển tác theo ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống**

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này phân tích nghĩa kinh nghiệm trong các bài bình luận về xung đột Nga - Ukraina dựa trên Ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống. Nghiên cứu kết hợp phân tích định tính và định lượng trên nguồn dữ liệu gồm các mệnh đề của 10 bài bình luận đăng trên *The New York Times* năm 2024. Kết quả cho thấy với việc chiếm ưu thế của quá trình Vật chất, các bài bình luận tập trung vào việc trình bày những gì đang xảy ra trong xã hội và các hành động mà các cơ quan, tổ chức hoặc chuyên gia đang thực hiện để phản ứng với xung đột đang diễn ra. Quá trình Phát ngôn thể xếp thứ hai về tần suất, cũng góp phần minh họa độ tin cậy của thông tin khi được truyền đạt bởi các cá nhân, tổ chức hoặc chuyên gia bàn về tình hình và các sự kiện xung quanh cuộc xung đột. Quá trình Quan hệ cũng xuất hiện để giải thích và mở rộng khái niệm, góp phần làm rõ bối cảnh sự kiện và mức độ trầm trọng của xung đột. Các quá trình Tinh thần, Tồn tại và Hành vi dù xuất hiện ít nhưng vẫn giúp tái hiện chiều sâu nhận thức và tăng tính thuyết phục từ cho bài bình luận tin.

Từ khóa: Ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống; bài bình luận; nghĩa kinh nghiệm; xung đột Nga - Ukraina.