

Transitivity and the Construction of Characters in the Narrative Discourse of *The English Patient*

Amina Megheirbi
University of Garyounis

Abstract: *Transitivity, which belongs to the experiential metafunction of language, is one of the grammatical systems that writers employ to convey different types of experiences. The options offered by the transitivity aspect and the choices made can greatly affect the interpretation of meaning. For this reason, models and frameworks for the study of transitivity in literal and non-literal texts have been developed as tools for both stylistics and critical linguistics analysis. This paper presents a linguistic analysis of transitivity in the narrative discourse of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992/2002). The main purpose of this analysis is to explore how choices of certain processes and their participants influence the perception of meaning and contribute to the shaping of characterisation in the novel.*

Introduction:

Linguistic analysis of literary texts facilitates the examination of linguistic options of certain grammatical aspects found in narrative discourse which affect characterisation and ideologically influence perspective and interpretation of meaning. One of these grammatical systems is the system of transitivity employed by writers to convey different types of experiences. This grammatical system, which belongs to the experiential metafunction of language, views language in terms of processes realised by verbal groups. Each process involves a special category of participants typically presented by nominal groups, in addition to circumstances associated with the process. The unique characteristic of the transitivity system provides a valuable means of investigating how a reader's or listener's perception of the meaning of a text is influenced by a choice of certain processes and their participants.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the working of grammar in the construction of characters in narrative discourse. Choices of certain transitivity modes in the narrative discourse of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992; 2002) will be examined using the analytical tools of the Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday, 2004). The focus of the analysis is to explore how the system of transitivity is employed by the author. First, the types of processes selected for the narration involving the characters will be analysed. This will be followed by an examination of the effect of the chosen processes on how the characters are viewed and perceived.

1. The Transitivity System:

The term transitivity as it is presented in Halliday's *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2004) refers to how speakers represent meaning in the clause rank through the transmission of their experiences of the world and their mental views of reality. According to Halliday:

Our most powerful impression of experience is that it consists of a flow of events, or 'going-on'. This flow of events is chunked into quanta of change by the grammar of the clause: each quantum is modelled as a figure – a figure of happening, doing, sensing, saying, being or having.
(2004: 170)

As part of the ideational function of language, transitivity expresses processes that involve participants and circumstances. These processes are realized by the verb phrase. Each process requires a set of participants that are represented by noun phrases. In this way, recognizing the kind of participants reveals the identity of the process. Circumstances, which are generally realized by adverbs or prepositional phrases, are not limited to one kind of process, but are used generally with different kinds of processes. "Processes can be classified according to whether they represent actions, speech, states of mind or simply states of being" (Simpson, 1993: 88). Thus, the transitivity system mainly expresses 'who (or what) does what to whom (or what)' (Simpson 1993: 88). As viewed by Montgomery (1993):

Transitivity blends considerations of both role and event within a single framework of analysis. It would, therefore, appear to offer an ideal tool for mediating between surface patterns of the text, on the one hand, and broader considerations of actantial role, on the other. (141)

Halliday (2004: 171-187) has classified six process types; material, mental, verbal, existential, relational, and behavioural. The participants involved in the material process are 'actor, goal, scope, attribute, recipient, and client'. There should be at least one participant, someone or something to perform the action (e.g. the 'actor' with intransitive verbs). For example compare these two:

- *The boy* (actor) *ran* (Material, action: intention).
- *The teacher* (actor) *sent* (Material, action: intention) *a letter* (goal) *to the parents* (recipient) *yesterday* (Circumstantial: Time)

The mental process includes the three main categories of perception, reaction, and cognition and these are associated with two participants the first of which is obligatory. These are a 'senser', a person who performs the mental process, and a 'phenomenon', the entity that is felt, thought about, or perceived. For example: *He* (senser) *heard* (mental Pr.: perception) *the news* (phenomenon) *on the radio* (circumstantial: Place). The third kind of process is the verbal, which is associated with a 'sayer' as the main participant in addition to a 'receiver' and 'verbiage'. For example: *The man* (sayer) *told* (verbal Pr.) *the boys* (receiver) *scary stories* (verbiage).

The existential is another type of process that requires only one participant, the 'existent'. It is used with the expletive 'there', which occupies an empty place. For example: *There (...) was (Existential Pr.) a huge fire (Existent) in the building (Circumstantial: Place)*. The fifth type is the relational process, which can be intensive, possessive, or circumstantial. The relational is either attributive or identifying and in both cases requires two participants; a 'carrier' and an 'attribute' or a 'token' and a 'value'. For example:

- Identifying: *That girl (Token) is (Relational Pr: Intensive) my sister (Value)*.
- Attributive: *This neighbour (Carrier) has (Relational Pr: possessive) a beautiful house (Attribute)*.

The last type of process is the behavioural which is accompanied by a 'behave' as the main participant but sometimes there may be a 'behaviour' associated with it. For example: *She (behave) stared at (Behavioural Pr.) her opponent (behaviour)*.

An important feature of transitivity is passivisation, which is not permitted in some of these processes. For instance, the existential and the attributive relational processes never occur in the passive voice, whereas, the material includes a set of verbs that can be passivised and others (intransitive) which cannot.

The availability of all these different types of processes provides a 'network' of choices to express varieties of experiences such as those of the outside 'material' world or of the person's 'inner' thoughts (Halliday, 2004). The options offered by the transitivity aspect and the choices made can greatly affect the interpretation of meaning. Kies (1995) points out that "*literature* is experienced ... through language; and it is the goal of ... stylistics to highlight the linguistic features that evoke those literary (and emotional) experiences for the readers." For this reason, models and frameworks for the study of transitivity in literal and non-literal texts have been developed as tools for both stylistics and critical linguistic analysis. In fact, Halliday's analysis of William Golding's novel *The Inheritors* (1971) was the first study to actually undergo such linguistic analysis of narrative texts, focusing on the transitive system of the language. After this influential study, developments in the field of discourse analysis and in Systemic Functional Grammar brought about analytical tools that are used by stylisticians and discourse analysts to study the working of the transitivity system in the production of meaning. Among these studies are Montgomery's (1993) analysis of character in Hemingway's short story 'The revolutionist' and Simpson and Montgomery's (1995) analysis of Bernard MacLaverly's *Cal*.

2. The Role of Transitivity in *The English Patient*

In this study the transitivity choices foregrounded for the main characters in the first section (The Villa) of the narrative of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992; 2002: 3-25) are analysed and compared. The narration in this

section introduces the two main characters of the story; the *English patient* and his nurse *Hana*. From the beginning of the story the reader recognises that *the English patient* is seriously burned and is in a state of inactivity and that *Hana* is young, active and restless. The purpose of this study is to explore how the transitivity system is employed to express and represent these two characters. The narration about each character will be analysed in terms of the processes chosen and their effect on the construction of each character.

A rough statistical review may shed light on the processes assigned for *the English patient* and for *Hana*. Table 1 shows the number of clauses for each type of process for these two characters. It is observed that most of the processes involving *Hana* are of the material type (about 114 clauses out of 144). On the other hand, *the English patient* is narrated about using mainly material, mental, and relational processes. The verbal and behavioural processes are not significant in the narration of either character.

Table 1. The number of clauses for each type of process for the two characters in *The English Patient*.

Process type	Material Process	Mental Process	Verbal Process	Relational Process	Behavioural Process	Total clauses
<i>Hana</i>	114 (Action/Intention)	15	2	8	9	145
<i>The Patient</i>	37	23	8	21	3	92

2.1. Character One: *Hana*

An analysis of the processes involving *Hana* shows the heavy utilization of the material process and the relative undermining of the other processes such as the mental and the relational. This stylistic choice of the material process in the representation of the character of *Hana* has its significance. Simpson points out that:

One of the stylistic consequences of the dominant material paradigm, where mental and other processes signifying reflection and deliberation are suppressed, is that it creates a highly 'actional' descriptive framework.
(1993: 97)

The material process can represent either an action or event and the action can be of intention, when the ACTOR is performing the action deliberately or of supervision, when the ACTOR is performing the action involuntarily. According to Halliday (2004: 179), "...some input of energy" is necessary in this process and one participant- the ACTOR- is "the one that brings about the change"(179). An examination of the material processes involving *Hana* shows that they are all action process of intention. In all these clauses she is in control

of her actions doing everything deliberately. The following examples show this material/ action/ intention pattern:

1. She crosses the loggia and quickly enters the house. (p. 3)
2. Every four days she washes his black body, beginning at the destroyed feet. (p. 3)
3. She wets a washcloth and holding it above his ankles squeezes the water into him, ... (p. 3)

Another point to consider is that over half of these material processes (61 clauses) include more than one participant, which means that they can be expressed using either the passive voice or the active voice. However, the passivisation option has been suppressed. With the exception of one clause, all the material processes are expressed in the active voice. In these, *Hana* is always the ACTOR and is in the initial position of the clause (subject).

1. She closed the door and ... (p. 13)
2. ... and [she] replaced the seal of warning. (p. 13)
3. She opened the book. ... (p. 13)
4. She would open a door and ... (p. 14)
5. ... she rolled up her mattress and ... (p. 14)
6. ... and [she] tied it into a wheel with string. (p. 14)
7. She had cleared just small sections of the villa, ... (p. 16)
8. She lights a match in the dark hall and... (p. 16)
9. ...and [she] moves it onto the wick of the candle. (p. 16)

The only clause that is in the passive voice is negative:

10. She would not be ordered again or carry out duties for the greater good. (p. 15)

Although in the above agentless passive clause *she* is the GOAL not the ACTOR, the use of the negative form of the passive along with the modal *would* shows that nothing happened or would happen to her.

In the material action processes that have more than one participant (transitive verbs) the affected (entity) is either something or someone receiving the action. In the case of the identified processes concerning *Hana*, these entities are mostly unanimated objects, symbolising her control over the surrounding world; *the house, washcloth, calamine, the plum, the stone, the flesh, soap and sheets, the door, the book, fresh air*, etc. Only a few of the affects refer to someone (*the English patient*):

1. She would read to him and bathe him and give him his doses of morphine... (p.15)
2. She lifted both of his hands to her face... (p. 8)
or to her own body parts:
3. She puts her hand into her pocket. (p. 4)
4. She brushed her hand over its skin. (p. 7)

5. ... [she] moves her head from side to side ... (p. 25)

The other material action processes identified for *Hana* are those with only one participant, the ACTOR (*Hana* herself). This is recognised through the use of intransitive verbs, which generally indicate the description of actions which exist by themselves, and are not done on objects, things or people. However, it is worth mentioning that most of these intransitive verbs are used with locative circumstances (adverbs and prepositional phrases) that reflect a movement in different directions, which contribute to the descriptive framework of action drawn for the character *Hana* as illustrated in these examples:

1. She turns and moves uphill towards the house ... (p. 3)
2. In the kitchen she doesn't pause but goes through it ... (p. 3)
3. She leans forward... (p. 5)
4. If it is cold she moves carefully into the bed ... (p. 6)
5. ... she walked backwards... (p. 13)
6. She had gone into the library... (p. 14)
7. Within the village she would step from rubble to a candlelit alcove ... (p. 16)
8. She moves backwards a few feet and ... (p. 16)
9. She moves farther and farther away from the light. (p. 16)
10. Till she leans back onto her heels and ... (p. 16)
11. She leaps forward ... (p. 16)
12. She leaps up ... (p. 17)

2.2. Character Two: *The English Patient*

In contrast to *Hana's* character, which is depicted as active and in control of her action through a fixed pattern of the material action process of intention, *the English patient* is identified as inactive through the choices of certain processes that contribute to the construction of his character. These, as illustrated in Table 1, are material, mental, and relational processes. In this study the material processes involving *the English patient* are examined and compared to those of *Hana*. Then the mental and relational processes related to *the English patient* character are analysed to see how they shape the framework of inactivity.

Thirty-seven clauses about *the English patient* include verbs of material processes. Of these, thirty have transitive verbs, involving more than one participant, and the remainder have intransitive verbs with a single participant for each ACTOR. By analysing the transitive verbs, it is observed that they, like those for *Hana*, are all material action process of intention. The difference, however, can be explained in the following points:

First, nine of these verbs are in the passive voice. Something is done to *the English patient* by other ACTORS (agents). The following examples will illustrate this:

1. He was anointed. (p. 6)
2. He was carried in a palanquin of felt and branch. (p. 9)
3. He was carried towards something, ... (p. 21)

4. He was moved forward again. (p. 22)
5. He was brought to each of the guns. (p. 22)

Second, some of the affected entities in these material action processes are the patient's own body parts, which express a reflexive kind of action.

1. ...and he turns his head slowly towards her as she enters. (p. 3)
2. He turns his dark face with its grey eyes towards her. (p. 4)
3. He turns up his hearing aid to draw in a banging noise he still cannot interpret or place. (p. 17)
4. ... [he] inserted his finger to find no bullet,... (p. 22)
5. ... as when blind *he* moved his hand and ... (p. 24)
6. ... and [he] cut himself on a double-edged razor in the sand. (p. 24)

Third, since his body parts have the affect roles, they assume an ACTOR role too as in the following examples:

1. ...his body exposed to the breeze, ... (p. 3)
2. His eyes lock on to the young woman's face. (p. 5)
3. If she moves her head, his stare will travel alongside her into the wall. (p. 5)
4. His hands play with a piece of sheet, the back of his fingers caressing it. (p. 5)
5. ...his eyes open in the darkness. (p. 6)
6. ... his blindfolded face looking straight ahead, ... (p. 21)
7. ... and his hand made to reach out a yard or so. (p. 21)
8. ... and his hand sunk into a box of cartridges. (p. 22)

This reflects how *the English patient* is not in control of his own body parts as the movement and the action is performed by them. This kind of structure is known as middle sentences when active verbs are used instead of passive ones to describe actions that are caused or done by an unknown agent and the unanimated affects resume an actor role.

Fourth, in addition to the ACTOR role of *the English patient* in the previous examples, he, unlike *Hana*, occupies the roles of other participants (i.e. GOALS, CLIENT and RECIPIENT) as well as circumstantial roles. Things are happening and done to him by others without having control over them. Examine the following examples. The first group shows the participant roles and the second the circumstantial roles:

A. Participant roles:

1. She reads to him ... (p. 5)
2. She would care only for the burned patient. (p. 15)
3. She would read to him and bathe him and give him his doses of morphine-- ... (p. 15)
4. In the morning they took him to the far reach of the *siq*. (p. 21)
5. Eight weapons formally handed to him. (p. 22)

6. ... and taught him the game of Pelmanism. (p. 22)
7. ...-her only communication was with him... (p. 15)

B. Circumstantial roles:

8. They unwrapped the mask of herbs from his face... (p. 9)
9. They spread the layers of grey felt over him. (p. 6)
10. ... and came towards the burned pilot... (p. 10)
11. He crouched by the burned man. (p. 11)
12. They lifted the soft cloth off him, off the suck of his body. (p. 21)
13. They were talking loudly around him now. (p. 21)
14. The musicians sit across the fire from him. (p. 22)

Another pattern identified for *the English patient* is the mental process. The stylistic use of the mental process shows an intrusion into the characters thoughts, perception and affection. This mental process pattern interweaves with verbal process and with speech and thought presentation to express the patient's inner thoughts and consciousness. These patterns are suppressed when dealing with *Hana* while utilized with *the English patient* because they express and involve processes that *the English patient* in his inactive state is capable of performing. In addition to that, *the English patient* is introduced as the central character in this introductory section of the novel because access to his inner thoughts is permitted through the devices of mental processes and thought and speech presentation. This, though, is not available with *Hana* as the use of verbs of mental process is very limited when narrating about her.

The following are some examples of the **mental processes** identified for *the English patient* in this section of the novel.

1. He remembers picnics, a woman who kissed parts of his body that now are burned into the colour of aubergine. (p. 4)
2. During this time with these people, he could not remember where he was from. (p. 6)
3. ...and he imagined in his vanity hundreds of them around him ... (p. 6)
4. Now he knows where he is. (p. 24)
5. At times he doesn't know if these are dreams... (p. 24)

Examples of mental process of Perception:

6. He could smell the oasis before he saw it. (p. 6)
7. He could sense the one silent man who always remained beside him... (p. 6)
8. ... he saw beside him the face that had come each night ... (p. 6)
9. ... as he listened intently or not ... (p. 8)
10. One night he heard what seemed to be wind chimes high in the air, ... (p. 9)

The last significant pattern involving *the English patient* is the relational process. This process shows the state of being, possessing or becoming. It expresses one of these situations: 'x is y' (intensive), 'x is at y' (circumstantial), or 'x has y' (possessive). With regard to *the English patient*, two of these are identified in this section of the novel; the intensive and the circumstantial. These two patterns help identify the inactive patient through the use of either the circumstantial or the other identifying devices to describe him and to signal his location as he is not free to move but held captive in bed because of his burns. Here are some examples of the relational process:

A. Circumstantial:

1. The man lies on the bed, ... (p. 3)
2. He was on an altar of hammock ... (p. 6)
3. ... while elsewhere the English patient reposed in his bed like a king. (p. 15)
4. He was within the larger womb of the canyon. (p. 21)
5. He was here because of the buried guns. (p. 21)
6. He was there to translate the guns. (p. 22)

B. Intensive:

7. At night he is never tired enough to sleep. (p. 5)
8. Sometimes at two a.m. he is not yet asleep, ... (p. 6)
9. Unclothed he was once again the man naked beside the blazing aircraft. (p. 6)
10. ... and he was asleep. (p. 8)
11. And he, now in this desert, was sane, ... (p. 23)

3. Conclusion

From all these examples and the comparison made between the different choices available for *the English patient* and *Hana*, it can be concluded that each character has been shaped differently through the use of the processes of the transitivity system. One sentence from the novel can summarise this difference in choice and their effect on the characterization:

She was living like a vagrant, while elsewhere the English patient reposed in his bed like a king. (p. 15)

There is an action verb of material process in the present continuous tense expressing on-going activity and referring to *Hana*; in the second half of the sentence there is another clause that contains a relational circumstantial process identifying the location of *the English patient* using a verb in its static form.

Indeed the transitivity system along with other systems of the language such as speech and thought presentations and modality provides options that can contribute to the shaping of characterisation and influence the interpretation of meaning. The above analysis demonstrates that transitivity enriches the narrative analysis of character by focusing on both what's done and who's doing it, instead

of just focusing on the former and thus providing a valuable tool for the analysis of narrative discourse.

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