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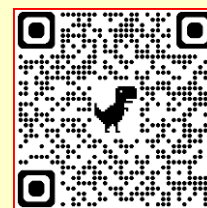
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Research on the Transitivity System in China: A Review and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

The transitivity system is an important linguistic resource for realizing ideational meaning in systemic functional linguistics, and it constitutes the semantic content of the clause. Taking the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database as its main data source, this paper selects and reviews articles on the transitivity system published in Chinese core journals of foreign-language studies from 2009 to 2019. The statistical findings show that, in addition to theoretical inquiry, the theory of the transitivity system has been widely applied to discourse analysis, translation studies, foreign-language teaching, and other fields, yielding substantial research achievements. By reviewing the current state of transitivity-system research in China, this paper aims to identify its potential and limitations and to offer new directions for future research.

KEY WORDS: transitivity system; ideational meaning; theoretical research; applied research; literature review

1. Introduction

The transitivity system was first developed within Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. According to systemic functional linguistics, language has three metafunctions: the ideational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the textual metafunction. Among them, the ideational metafunction is primary because human cognition of things is reflected in the ideational function of language. Transitivity is the semantic system through which the ideational metafunction is expressed. It is a system network concerning the types of processes represented in clauses, as well as the participants and circumstantial elements involved in those processes (He & Wei, 2016). Process is therefore the core component of the transitivity system. Halliday (1994) classifies human experience into six different types of processes: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes. Among these, material, mental, and relational processes are the three major process types in the transitivity system, whereas behavioral, verbal, and existential processes are the three minor process types. These different processes realize the ideational metafunction of

language, enabling people to talk about both the external world and the inner world.

This paper first briefly reviews the formation of transitivity theory and clarifies the developmental trajectory of the transitivity system. It then sorts out and summarizes articles on the transitivity system published in Chinese core journals of foreign-language studies over the past decade. On this basis, it evaluates the achievements and limitations of Chinese linguistic scholarship in both theoretical and applied research on the transitivity system, with the aim of helping readers grasp the current state and frontier developments of transitivity-system research.

2. Development of Transitivity-System Theory

In the 1960s, Halliday, the founder of systemic functional grammar, published a series of papers in which he first extended the object of transitivity research from the verb to the clause. Since then, systematic analysis of clausal transitivity has gradually developed.

In general, the development of Halliday's theory of the transitivity system can be divided into four stages. The first stage was marked by Halliday's 1961 paper "*Categories of the Theory of Grammar*," which signaled the initial emergence of transitivity theory. In this stage, he proposed four grammatical categories and three ranks. Although he did not directly explain the concept of clausal transitivity, this work laid a solid foundation for his later formulation of transitivity theory. In the second stage, Halliday first proposed the construction of a system-network framework for clausal transitivity. In the third stage, he redrew the transitivity system network and formally proposed three types of clausal processes, namely action, relational, and mental processes. In the fourth stage, the transitivity system basically took shape, and the six process types familiar to scholars today were ultimately established.

Over the past half century, many international scholars, including Matthiessen and Fawcett, have made major contributions to the refinement of transitivity theory. In 1995, Matthiessen expanded the transitivity system on the basis of Halliday's work. He distinguished four transitivity process types—material, mental, relational, and verbal processes—and strengthened the grammaticalization of the four relations. Fawcett also put forward his own insights on the basis of Halliday's account of transitivity theory. Through successive revisions and refinements, he constructed a relatively complete transitivity system network, which was eventually published in his book *The Functional Semantics Handbook: Analyzing English at the Level of Meaning*.

The theory of the transitivity system was introduced into China in the 1980s. Since then, Chinese scholars have continuously discussed, developed, and refined transitivity theory. To date, scholars who have offered detailed accounts of transitivity theory include Hu Zhuanglin, Cheng Qilong, and Zhang Delu. In *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*, Hu Zhuanglin provides a detailed discussion of the various manifestations of experiential function, the properties of the six processes, and the participants involved in each process. Cheng Qilong, in *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Grammar*, offers a new exploration of transitivity theory and presents his own distinctive views. In addition, many other Chinese scholars have focused on localizing transitivity theory. On the basis of absorbing its core theoretical principles, they have constructed transitivity system networks suitable for Chinese and applied them to studies of Chinese poetry, fiction, and other texts. These studies have all made important contributions to the extension and deepening of transitivity theory.

3. Data Sources

This paper takes the CNKI database as its main data source. By searching the keywords "transitivity," "transitivity system," and "transitivity theory," it selects articles related to the transitivity system that were published in core journals of foreign-language studies from 2009 to 2019. These articles were then categorized according to research theme. The statistics show that research on transitivity in China has mainly focused on four areas: theoretical exploration of the transitivity system (10 articles), application of the transitivity system to discourse analysis (15 articles), application of the transitivity system to translation studies (9 articles), and application of the transitivity system to foreign-language teaching (2 articles).

4. Four Major Themes in Chinese Research on the Transitivity System

The above statistics show that, over the past decade, some Chinese scholars have investigated the theory of the transitivity system itself, seeking to deepen the theory, while others have put the theory into practice by applying it to discourse analysis or to practical issues in translation and foreign-language teaching.

4.1 Theoretical Exploration

According to Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, process is the core of transitivity-system research and has therefore naturally become a central concern for scholars. Ma (2009) reviews and sorts out influential earlier theories in systemic functional linguistics and, by drawing on speech-act theory, reveals the rich connotations of the concept of "process" from multiple perspectives, thereby further deepening research on the transitivity system.

In recent years, in addition to extensive exploration of conventional theories such as transitivity process types, Chinese linguists have also developed a number of extended theoretical discussions, including studies of ditransitive clauses. Lu (2010) focuses on the polysemy of ditransitive structures, summarizes the various experiential types that ditransitive structures can represent, and argues that such polysemy derives from the mismatch between the event types of ditransitive structures and the process verbs involved. Later, Zhang and Chen (2014) study the diversity of ditransitive process types from the perspective of functional semantics and clarify the experiential meaning potential of such clauses, thereby providing a new research perspective for analyzing ditransitive structures. At the same time, some scholars have turned their attention to transitivity-system research on special English sentence patterns. For example, Chai's (2013) discussion of the semantic and grammatical features of the English there-be construction and the metaphorical representation system involved in that process greatly enriches and extends theoretical research on the transitivity system.

In addition, some scholars, taking Chinese linguistic facts as their basis, have worked to construct a transitivity-system theory that is consistent with Chinese linguistic reality and suitable for analyzing Chinese linguistic phenomena. For instance, Zheng (2012) conducts a transitivity analysis of the Chinese ba-construction from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics. Zhao (2016), drawing on metafunctional theory, analyzes the ideational function of Chinese proverbs. The study argues that Chinese and English proverbs share many similarities in the transitivity system of ideational function and that their meanings can be represented through the six experiential processes. He and Wei (2016) review and evaluate the development of transitivity theory both in China and abroad, pointing out the main problems and limitations in existing research. While further refining the English transitivity network system, they also construct a relatively complete Chinese transitivity system network.

4.2 Discourse Analysis

The transitivity system has been widely applied in discourse analysis. Such studies generally count and examine the frequency and distribution of the six transitivity process types in texts, identify the linguistic features of discourse, and, in connection with the nature of the discourse and its context of utterance, analyze the speaker's perspective and the communicative intentions conveyed by the author.

A review of articles applying the transitivity system to discourse analysis in China over the past decade shows that such analyses have mainly focused on literary works. In terms of research content, however, transitivity analysis of literary texts has gradually moved beyond traditional stylistic analysis and extended to the exploration

of characterization, personality, and psychological development, with particular emphasis on the themes and deeper meanings of literary works.

Fu (2012), taking three scenes from the short story “Clay” as examples, uses transitivity-system theory to conduct a detailed interpretation of key clauses and shows how these linguistic features help the author convey the theme of the story. Zhang and Zhang (2013) employ the transitivity system to offer a detailed interpretation of Mansfield’s short story “*Old Underwood*,” analyzing the protagonist’s existence as a marginalized figure and the reasons for this condition. Their study is significant for exploring the deeper meanings of the story.

Subsequently, transitivity-system analysis of literary works has no longer been confined to the exploration of textual depth; instead, it has increasingly focused on character analysis in fiction. Zhang and Hu (2016), from the perspective of linguistic features, examine the developmental process of Celie, the protagonist of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, from a lack of self-consciousness to the gradual formation of independent self-awareness. Their study provides scholars with a new perspective for interpreting Black female Bildungsromane.

It is worth noting that, in recent years, apart from literary works, Chinese scholars have also applied the transitivity system to discourse analysis in other genres, including news reports, speeches, and legal texts. For example, Bai (2009) uses the transitivity system to analyze legislative discourse and reveals possible power consciousness embedded behind linguistic choices. This study not only improves the transitivity analysis of legal discourse but also broadens the research scope of transitivity theory. Li (2009) focuses on the generic transitivity analysis of English briefs and provides an in-depth explanation of the relationship between their linguistic features and linguistic functions. Wang (2010) analyzes the six process types in the lyrics of “*Blue and White Porcelain*” by using transitivity-system theory and finds that the foregrounding of material processes and circumstantial elements plays an important role in listeners’ comprehension and memory of the discourse; the study also explains why the lyrics can evoke a strong sense of imagery and visual impact. He (2010) uses the six process types of the transitivity system to explain how the ideational function in Obama’s inaugural address is realized through the selection and use of linguistic processes. Dai and Qiu (2012), adopting an eco-critical discourse analysis approach, investigate the linguistic features of 20 English introductions to eco-hotels from the perspective of the transitivity system and reveal how such hotels realize promotion and profit-making through the choice of specific semantic systems. In sum, transitivity-system theory offers a new and relatively objective analytical perspective for texts of different genres, while also promoting the extension of transitivity-system research into broader fields.

4.3 Translation

The transitivity system is an important linguistic resource for realizing ideational meaning in systemic functional linguistics and constitutes the semantic content of the clause. Since the essential nature of translation is to reproduce the meaning carried by one language in another language, analyzing translation phenomena from the perspective of the transitivity system is an effective method.

Cheng and Liang (2008) point out that the transitivity system imposes certain constraints on English-Chinese translation. They argue that when translators adopt transposition, they may change the

process in a clause, thereby preventing the translation from accurately conveying the precise meaning of the source text. Therefore, the study maintains that the transitivity process used in the source text should be preserved as far as possible during translation. Also discussing the translation of transitivity processes, Zhou and Ning (2013) propose a different view. While acknowledging the need for fidelity to the source text, they argue that translation must also take into account the constraints imposed by cultural factors on people’s habits of linguistic expression. Variation in process components during translation is therefore necessary, and appropriate shifts can make the translation more fluent and natural, in line with Chinese writing conventions.

The studies above mainly discuss the implications and guidance that the transitivity system offers for English-Chinese translation. In fact, over the past decade, Chinese scholars in the field of translation studies have paid greater attention to English-Chinese comparison and English translation analysis of poetry and classical texts. Xu and Zhou (2011), from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, conduct a detailed comparative transitivity analysis of Xu Zhimo’s representative poem “Saying Goodbye to Cambridge Again” and its translations. Their study not only provides readers with a new perspective for appreciating the meaning of the poem but also fully demonstrates the explanatory power of transitivity-system theory in poetic analysis. Sun et al. (2011) analyze the differences in the selection of transitivity process types, participants, and circumstantial elements in Mao Zedong’s poem “*Qinyuanchun: Changsha*” and its translations. They explore the relationship between the choice of transitivity processes and ideological construction, thereby uncovering the ideology hidden behind the poem; the study is highly innovative. Zhang (2016), through a detailed interpretation of the linguistic features of Qu Yuan’s “Li Sao” and three translations by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Hawkes, and Zhuo Zhenying, respectively discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the three translations and fully reveals the importance of the choice of logical relations between clauses and circumstantial elements in the transitivity system for the expression of the author’s emotions in lyric poetry. It can thus be seen that the transitivity system plays an important role in English-Chinese comparative studies and has far-reaching significance for the development of translation studies in China.

4.4 Foreign-Language Teaching

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have begun to use transitivity-system theory to guide foreign-language teaching practice. Lu (2016), taking the transitivity system of systemic functional linguistics as the theoretical framework and 52 picture-based compositions written by primary school students as the corpus, conducts an empirical study of the individualization of compositions written by students in one class. The study refutes the common social judgment that primary school students’ compositions lack imagination and creativity. Its findings undoubtedly provide implications for future reforms in writing education, research on individualized assessment of compositions, and the promotion of adolescents’ creative ability. Zhang (2016), based on the transitivity system and using contrastive analysis, reveals similarities and differences between Chinese English learners and native English speakers in oral narrative discourse, as well as the potential influence of Chinese. The study shows that, in terms of transitivity processes, Chinese English learners use verbs or verb phrases that are overly simple and insufficiently varied, which makes their English oral narratives less precise. This study has important significance for improving both English learners’ oral proficiency and English speaking instruction. The above studies fully

demonstrate that the transitivity system provides an effective and feasible theoretical framework for foreign-language teaching research.

5. Problems and Prospects

Although Chinese scholars have made progress in many aspects of transitivity-system research, several problems and limitations remain.

First, transitivity-system theory still needs further development and refinement. Over the past decade, most studies of transitivity-system theory have drawn on previous research and have mainly interpreted and summarized earlier scholars' work; as a result, they lack sufficient depth. If future development of transitivity theory is to achieve new breakthroughs, more effort must be devoted to enriching and innovating theoretical methods. The transitivity system should be interpreted from multiple levels and perspectives so as to further promote the extension of transitivity-system theory into wider and broader fields.

Second, the research perspectives used in transitivity analysis of different types of discourse remain relatively limited. Although transitivity theory provides an effective and feasible theoretical framework for analyzing different types of discourse, the complexity of the content and themes of certain texts means that the use of the transitivity system alone often cannot fully uncover the rich meanings of discourse or provide a reasonable explanation of the deeper meanings of language. To address this limitation, future research may combine transitivity theory with theories from other disciplines, thereby making research findings more convincing.

Finally, with regard to the application of the transitivity system in translation studies, the research objects show obvious limitations. Articles published in core journals of foreign-language studies over the past decade have mostly been confined to studies of poetry and news translation, while relatively little attention has been paid to novels, prose, drama, and other genres. The range of research objects is therefore not broad enough. In future research, if scholars can conduct Chinese-English comparisons and translation comparisons of other types of texts, it will be more conducive to exploring the different linguistic features and expressive habits of Chinese and English in depth. Such research can provide an objective basis for translation evaluation and create broader developmental space for the application of the transitivity system in translation studies.

6. Conclusion

By collecting and reviewing literature on the transitivity system published in Chinese core journals of foreign-language studies from 2009 to 2019, this paper finds that, over the past decade, Chinese scholarship has achieved remarkable results in both theoretical exploration and applied research, greatly enriching transitivity-system research in China. However, despite these achievements, Chinese research on the transitivity system still has some shortcomings, including insufficient innovation in research approaches and methods and a relatively limited range of research content. To solve these problems, Chinese linguists need to make joint efforts to explore the potential of transitivity-system theory in greater depth and to innovate and enrich research methods, so as to promote new breakthroughs in transitivity research in China. It is reasonable to believe that, as the theory of the transitivity system continues to develop in depth, expand in scope, and innovate in methodology, it will demonstrate greater academic value and broader application prospects.

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