

# Transitivity Analysis of the Lyrics of Olympic Songs

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**Keywords:** Systemic-functional grammar, Transitivity, Olympic songs, Lyrics

**Abstract:** Systemic functional grammar proposed by M.A.K Halliday is one of the most influential linguistic schools in the world in recent years. The transitivity theory provides a new method and perspective for the analysis of lyric texts. This paper makes a transitivity analysis of the meta-function of previous Olympic songs in order to explore the functional meanings, reveal the regularity of their distribution process, genre characteristics, and test the applicability and operability of functional grammar in discourse analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Every successful Olympic Games has its own popular theme song, which is a hymn symbolizing peace and hope. In 1896, when the ancient Greek music “Olympic Anthem” was sung at the scene of the first modern Olympic Games, music was deeply bound to the Olympic Games. Olympic Anthem has witnessed the development of the modern Olympic movement. The wide spread of these songs has attracted the attention of some scholars at home and abroad, but their previous research mainly focused on the cultural background, social value or translation aspects. This paper collects the lyrics of 15 classical songs of the last eight Olympic Games as the research corpus, aiming to explore their deep meaning under the guidance of functional linguistics framework.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

Language is the product of human social activities and a tool of human communication. It bears various functions. These functions are changeable, but they can still be classified into several limited abstract and more general sub-functions. Halliday, the founder of functional linguistics, summed up the universal features inherent in this language use into three meta-functions: conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function.<sup>[1]</sup> The three meta-functions are the basis of exploring the ways of creating and understanding meaning. They have their own emphases, but they depend on each other and complement each other. Halliday believes that one of the purposes of constructing systemic functional linguistics is to provide a theoretical framework for discourse analysis, which should be based on grammatical analysis.<sup>[2]</sup> Through many years of discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics is more suitable for discourse analysis than other theories.<sup>[3]</sup> According to Huang Guowen, we can use this theory to guide our practice of discourse analysis. Systemic functional linguistics is a general linguistic theory with strong operability, applicability and practicability. It can be used to analyze various types of discourse.<sup>[4]</sup>

## 3. Lyrics as a Text

Discourse usually refers to a series of consecutive paragraphs or sentences that constitute the whole language. It can be monologue, dialogue, multi-person exchanges, text signs (such as traffic signs), poetry and novels. It can be a speech or an article; a short one or two sentences can be a discourse, and a long discourse can have more than ten thousand words. Therefore, it can be said that whether it is a greeting, a conversation, a thesis defense, an answer to a press conference, or a note, a letter, a scientific research report, a manuscript, they can be called discourse.<sup>[5]</sup> Hu Zhuanglin pointed out that “discourse refers to any natural language that is not fully constrained by sentence grammar and expresses complete semantics in a certain context. Its purpose is to achieve

specific communicative tasks or complete certain behaviors through language as a medium.” [6]

Lyrics refer to the part of words in a song. Because most of the lyrics are rhymed, it is also a kind of a literary genre. From the above definition, it is not difficult to find that lyrics are a special type of writing style, which can be appreciated by the audience in the form of singing. In the context of discourse, lyrics, like other types of discourse, also bear certain functions and contain rich transitivity processes. As one of the symbols of the Olympic Games, Olympic songs carry the expectations of the people in the world for the Olympic Games and show their spiritual outlook.

#### 4. Conceptual Function in Olympic Lyrics

According to Halliday, conceptual function refers to the expression of people's experiences in the external world and inner world. Transitivity is a semantic system that represents the function of concepts. Its function is to divide people's experiences in the external world and inner world into several processes.<sup>[1]</sup>

- (1). Material process: a process of doing, which means the action or event happened.
- (2). Psychological process: it is the process of feeling, reaction and cognition.
- (3). Relational process: a process of being that reflects the relationship between things.
- (4). Behavioral process: a process of behaving, such as breathing, coughing, sighing, dreaming, crying and laughing.
- (5). Speech process: a process of saying.
- (6). Process of existence: a process of existing

##### 4.1 Material Process in Lyrics

These six processes summarize the most important activities and events in the world of human experience. By analyzing the transitivity process of 15 Olympic songs, the proportion of them in the songs is summarized as follows in Table 1.

Table 1 Proportion of Six Processes in Olympic Lyrics

Process	Material	Relational	Psychological	Behavioral	Verbal	Existence
Number	174	62	50	9	7	7
Percentage	56.3%	20.6%	16.2%	2.9%	2.3%	2.3%

It is not difficult to see from the table that the most common process is material process. Because the material world is primary. The material process can improve the authenticity and objectivity of the text, and the material process is generally represented by dynamic verbs. In the Olympic songs, the use of these verbs in large numbers forms many action behaviors, which makes the audience immerse themselves in the scene. For example:

- (1) Come to play to win. (Reach out 1984)
- (2) If I could reach higher, just for one moment touch the sky. (Reach 1996)
- (3) We travel on, guided by the flame. (The Flame 2000)
- (4) Our race is yet to run. (Under the Southern Skies 2000)
- (5) Hawks and sparrows race in my waters. (Oceania 2004)

The choice of the material process, the arrangement of its components, the choice of language, the sender and the undertaker of the action all embody the purpose and thoughts of the songwriter. In the clauses of the material process of Olympic songs, the actors have presented their diversity, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Choices of Actor in Material Process

Actor	First person	Second person	Third Person	Abstract noun	Humanistic things	Natural things
Number	68	44	14	26	19	2
Percentage	39.2%	25%	8.1%	15.5%	10.8%	1.4%

It can be seen from the above table that the first and second person as actors are widely used in

songs, and the verbs involved are mainly transitive verbs. The use of first person singular “I” is convenient for singers to express their inner feelings, which makes the audience feel friendly and natural. The plural form “we” not only include singers and listeners, but also refer to peace loving people all over the world. Using “we” means putting the singer and the audience on the same position and drawing the audience to the singer's side, which can win the support of the audience.

It is worth noting that many abstract nouns are used as actors in Olympic songs, such as spirit, power, dream, love, harmony, world and so on. These words are related to human spiritual life, reflecting the Olympic spirit of “mutual understanding, long-term friendship, unity and fair competition”, with strong vitality and guiding role, leading people to move towards higher goals.

In addition, the actors in the lyrics include some humanistic things. They emphasize the humanistic and natural value of sports, focus on the truth, goodness and beauty of sports, and stress that sports should serve the harmonious development of human and nature as well as promoting the establishment of a peaceful society that maintains the dignity of human and nature.

#### 4.2 Relational Process in Lyrics

There are 62 sentences in relational process, accounting for 20.6% of the whole. According to Thompson, relational process, as the name implies, expresses the relationship between the two persons, the attributes of someone, something, or some events, or one's inner values or beliefs.<sup>[2]</sup> It can be further divided into “attributive” and “identifying” relational process. The two participants of attributive process are “carrier” and “attribute”, while the participants of identifying process are “identified” and “identifier”. These two processes can be further divided into “intensive”, “circumstantial” and “possessive”. Through the sentence analysis of 62 relational processes in the songs, the results are shown in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3 Attributive Process In Olympic Lyrics

Attributive	Intensive	Circumstantial	Possessive
Number	34	4	2
Percentage	85%	10%	5%

Table 4 Identifying Process In Olympic Lyrics

Identifying	Intensive	Circumstantial	Possessive
Number	17	3	2
Percentage	77.3%	13.6%	9.1%

From the tables, we find that in the Olympic songs, most of the sentences of relational process belong to the attributive type, among which the intensive type occupies the absolute advantage. Specifically speaking, the term “intensive” means one entity belongs to another. For example:

- (1) I'm gonna be so much stronger. (Reach 1996)
- (2) I'm alive. (Amigo para siempre 1992)
- (3) Our sweat is salty. (Oceania 2004)
- (4) We are together. (A thousand year 2004)

It is also found that the carrier of songs is usually the pronoun or noun to express the entity. The term “I” and “we” have the highest frequency, which is in line with the people-oriented characteristics of the Olympic Games and the concept of the National Olympic Games. Olympism emphasizes that people have strong physiques through exercise and participation, and encourages the public to participate in sports. In the intensive process type, the expression of attribute is relatively monotonous, which is often a noun or an adjective without the definite article “the”.

A large number of adjectives have appeared in previous songs, reflecting the writers' inner thoughts. They hope to convey faster, higher and stronger enterprising spirit through lyrics, so as to encourage people of all countries to strive for a peaceful and beautiful world. In addition, when nouns act as attributes in lyrics, there are often rhetorical devices of metaphor. And the vehicle also presents the characteristics of human culture. With this kind of vehicle, we can express feelings quickly, understand easily, enhance identity and produce resonance. For example:

- (1) Every pearl is a girl. (Oceania 2004)

- (2) Every child can be a hero. (Under the Southern Sky 2000)
- (3) We are a family of children. (Under the Southern Sky 2000)
- (4) I could be a common thief. (Oceania 2004)

### 4.3 Psychological Process in Olympic Lyrics

The psychological process also plays an important role in lyrics. The description of the Olympic Games is inseparable from feelings and emotions. Therefore, it is natural for songs to reflect the process of experience and emotion. The psychological process clauses in songs often uses “you” as the perceiver to let the audience feel and recognize themselves, so as to deepen their understanding of the world. At the same time, psychological process also conveys feelings and hopes or people's intention to the external world through singers. For example:

- (1) You know every wish you have's at your command. (Reach out 1984)
- (2) You can look into my eyes and see the way I feel. (Amigos para siempre 1992)
- (3) Those dreams, you want with all your heart. (Reach 1996)
- (4) Look to you to see the future stronger and free. (The Flame 2000)

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the conceptual function of Halliday's systemic functional grammar, this paper analyzes 15 songs of the recent seven Olympic Games from the perspective of transitivity. It is found that the selection of transitivity process of Olympic lyrics is regular, with material, relationship and psychological processes as the core, and other processes are relatively rare. Most of the lyricists take human beings or Olympic related things (such as the flame and spirit) as the actors of material process, the carrier of relational process, and the perceiver of psychological process. This fully reflects the characteristics and value of the Olympic Games, and proves that systemic functional grammar is a practical model for analyzing various kinds of discourse.

## Acknowledgment

This paper is funded by Higher Education Teaching Research and Reform Program of Guangdong 2020, China “Research and Practice of ESP teaching mode based on Production-Oriented Approach(POA)”; Foundation for Young Talents in Higher Education of Guangdong 2020, China “Research on Police English Teaching Based on Flipped Classroom and Blended Teaching Method” (2020wqncx056).

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