

Study of Plot Development from the Perspective of Transitivity Analysis

-- Taking *A Woman on a Roof* as an Example

Yafei Pang

Foshan University, Foshan, Guangdong, 528000, China

Abstract: This paper analyzes the short novel *A Woman on a Roof* by Doris Lessing from the perspective of transitivity analysis, focusing on how the development of plot is revealed through transitivity analysis within Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar is designed for the purpose of text analysis and to account for how the language is used. The conclusion of this study is that transitivity analysis is a powerful tool in analyzing literary works and it also provides us with a new perspective to appreciate and evaluate literary works.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Grammar; Transitivity Analysis; Plot Development; *A Woman on a Roof*.

1. Introduction

Within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), this paper aims to analyze the plot development in the novel *A Woman on a Roof* written by Doris Lessing. According to Halliday (1994: xv), the purpose of constructing SFG is to provide a theory to "say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English". As one of the approaches to discourse analysis, SFG has been paid more attention because of its strong applicability in various texts, ranging from the spoken discourse to the written discourse, from literary genres to everyday genres. This paper will apply the Hallidayan approach to analyze the plot development in the novel *A Woman on a Roof*. From the functional perspective, it will analyze how the writer succeeds in making a perfect plot through the choices of different transitivity processes.

Doris Lessing is a Persian (Iranian)-born British writer, whose novels and short stories are largely concerned with people caught in the social and political upheavals of the 20th century. *A Woman on a Roof* is one of her famous works. In this story, Doris Lessing lively describes how the three workers tried to attract the attention of the woman on the roof. No matter how the three workers constantly whistling, jeering and yelling at her, the woman still showed indifference to them and continued to enjoy the afternoon sunshine leisurely. The restlessness and indifference, harassment and rejection continued like this, and the three men felt humiliated. In the end, they left the roof with extreme helplessness and anger. After the hot weather ended, the woman no longer appeared in their sight. This paper will focus on the following research question: how the different transitivity processes reveal the plot development? In the discussion, the first two paragraphs and the last two paragraphs will be concerned.

2. Plot Development from the Perspective of Transitivity

2.1. The Definitions of the Plot

Plot is a literary device that writers use to structure what happens in a story (<https://literarydevices.net/plot/>). However,

there is more to this device than combining a sequence of events. Plots must present an event, action, or turning point that creates conflict or raises a dramatic question, leading to subsequent events that are connected to each other as a means of "answering" the dramatic question and conflict. The arc of a story's plot features a causal relationship between a beginning, middle, and end in which the conflict is built to a climax and resolved in conclusion. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg (2023) define "plot" as "the dynamic, sequential element in narrative". For them, anything dynamic in a narrative work becomes a part of the plot. Ronald (2012) describes 20 common story plots and gives lots of detail on how to construct complete stories around them. Plot is a process, not an object. We tend to talk about plots as if they were objects. All our plot metaphors describe plot as if it were some tangible things that came in a box. Once you realize that plot reaches down to the atomic level in your writing, and that every choice you make ultimately affects plot, you will realize its dynamic quality. Plot is dynamic, not static.

After the analysis of three different definitions of plot, the essence of the plot begins to appear: "plot" should be considered as the narrated content or events in the dualist distinction. In literary criticism, when one is talking about plot, he has an intention, explicit or implicit, in his mind: the concern with the general arrangement and the total effect of the text. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg (2023) points out the most typical plot is, in every sense of the word, the articulation of the skeleton of narrative.

Broadly speaking, any study of fiction is a study of "plot", for any study will be inevitably concerned with the events and artistic and emotional effects achieved. We must narrow down the scope of the study on "plot" and make it more specific. First, a study on "plot" should focus on the sequence of the events as a whole, not on the isolated happenings. Second, the critic's attention should be on the dynamic process of the events, which is interrelated either temporarily or causally, not on the static characteristics of the happenings. Finally, in terms of the artistic and emotional effects achieved, the study should be mainly based on an analysis of the events or the content, instead of the forms or the techniques.

Simply speaking, "plot", the action in fiction, is the arrangement of events that make up a story. A story's "plot"

keeps us turn pages: we read to find out what will happen next. But for a plot to be effective, it must include a sequence of incidents that bear a significant causal relationship to each other. That is to say, one thing happens because of something else.

2.2. Introduction of Transitivity

Halliday (1994/2000:106) maintains that the transitivity theory construes the world of experience into manageable set of process types. In principle, the system includes processes, participants and circumstances(optionally). The participants are the entities involved in the process. Circumstances mean time, place, matter, accompaniment and so on. The process refers to what is going on in the whole clause and that part of the proposition encoded in the verbal group. Because processes are typically realized in the verbal group, according to the different types of verbs, there are six types of processes, namely, material process, mental process, relational process, verbal process, behavioral process and existential process.

As the process most frequently used in the experience of world, the material processes are processes of “doing”. They express the notion that some entity does something which may be done to some other entity. Mental processes involve something that goes on in the internal world of the mind, or something concerned with reaction, affection, cognition and perception. The relational processes are those of being. Verbal processes are processes of “saying”. Behavioral processes relate to specifically human physiological and psychological behavior, like breathing, coughing, smiling, dreaming and staring. The final type is existential processes, representing that something exists or happens.

2.3. How the Plot Development Revealed through Transitivity Analysis

Table 1. Different processes

Process:	Clauses
Relational	It was during the week of hot sun, that June.
Relational	Three men were at work on the roof, where the leads got so hot they had the idea of throwing water on to cool them.
Material	But the water steamed, then sizzled.
Material	They make jokes about getting an egg from some woman in the flats under the flats under them, to poach it for their dinner.
Relational	By two it was not possible to touch the guttering they were replacing.
Mental	They speculated about what workmen did in regularly hot countries.
Material	Perhaps they should borrow kitchen gloves with the egg?
Relational	They were all a bit dizzy, not used to the heat.
Material	They shed their coats and stood side by side squeezing themselves into a foot wide patch of shade against a chimney, careful to keep their feet in the thick socks and boots out of the sun.
Existential	There was a fine view across several acres of roofs.
Relational	Not far off a man sat in a deck chair reading the newspaper.
Mental	Then they saw her, between chimneys, about fifty yards away.
Relational	She lay face down on a brown blanket.
Mental	They could see the top part of her: black hair, a flushed solid back, arms spread out.

Based on the significant research given above, in this paper, the first and the last part of the novel will be chosen to analyze the plot development in the novel *A Woman on a Roof* from the perspective of Transitivity Theories.

In order to see the relationship between plot development and transitivity directly, all of the clauses at the first part of the novel will be analyzed in Table 1.

In the first two paragraphs, there are all together fourteen clauses among which six relational processes, four material processes, three mental processes and one existential process. The four material processes tell us the weather and the response of the three workers to the weather. The three mental processes show us three workers begin to find it hard to bear the hot weather and suddenly they find a woman on the roof. It is notable that in the six relational processes, two related with the weather, two with the three workers, one with a man not far off, and the last one with the woman on the roof.

There are two types of relational processes: the attributive relational process and the identifying relational process. The attributive ones are not versersible: there is no form *wise is Tom* which is agnate to *Tom is wise*. The identifying ones are reversible, so that we can say: Tom is the leader/the leader is Tom. (Halliday, 1978/2001; Thompson,1996/2000; Hu,2005; Huang,2021; Huang etc., 2021b). The first type takes on the statement of the entity, which suggests the relationship between the Carrier and the Attribute. The second type is to identify one entity in terms of another.

The first two paragraphs are the beginning of the novel. Usually, at the beginning of the novel, the author tells us the background information of the story, such as the characters in the story and when and where the story happens. The attributive relational process just describes and makes a justification to the entity and the real world which can make the readers understand the truth of the real world and the relationship between people and different things. So from the six relational processes, we find two Attributes “during the week of hot sun, that June” and “not possible to touch the guttering they were replacing” which tell us the situation of the Carrier “it” (referring to the weather). In other words, they make us clear when the novel happens. The other two attributes “at work on the roof, where the leads got so hot they had the idea of throwing water on to cool them” and “all a bit dizzy, not used to the heat” indicate the true facts of the Carrier, the three worker, main characters of the novel. Besides, from these two attributes, we are able to know not only where the story happens, on the roof, but also the spiritual situation of the three workers. Mentioning the nearby man implies that the author turns the eyes to the far place, which makes a good preparation for the discovery of the woman on the roof. The last relational process introduces another main character of the novel, the woman on the roof. The attribute “lay face down on a brown blanket” lets us know that the woman is different from the three workers for they are from different social classes and she is not busy but sunbathes herself. In the first two paragraphs, the author lists the essential elements of the novel: when, where and who in this novel. The hot summer day in June and the terrible working condition, both contribute to a fact that the three workers become more and more hot-tempered. Two relational processes about the three workers show us that they work on the roof despite it is very hot, and at first they have some ideas to change the situation for they want to throw water on to cool them. But it is of no use. They all feel dizzy, not used to the heat, but they still must work under the cruel condition. So,

what would happen next? Obviously, from the description, we can foresee the conflict of the weather and the three workers. One relational process is about a man on the roof reading newspapers, and one relational about a woman lying face down on a brown blanket. Under such weather, different from the three workers, some people could take advantage of it and sunbathe themselves. So there are two totally different pictures. Such hot weather is good for some people enjoying themselves by sunbathing, but terrible for the workers, because it is quite easy for them to get the sunstroke. Till now we can predict the possible conflict between different classes. All of these elements are essential to the plot development of the novel. Because of the above descriptions, in the following part of the novel, the conflicts among the hot weather, the woman on the roof and the three workers will be easily foreseen.

From the transitivity analysis of the first part, we have been clear about the three basic elements in this novel: when, where and who in this story and can foresee what would happen in the following story. Now, let's move on to the last part of the novel. Still, for analysis convenience, each clause will be analyzed in Table 2.

Table 2. Different processes

Process	Clauses
Relational	Next day when he woke the sky was grey.
Material and Mental	He looked at the wet grey and thought, vicious: well, that's fixed you, hasn't it now?
Material	That's fixed you good and proper.
Relational	The three men were at work early on the cool leads, surrounded by damp drizzling roofs where no one came to sun themselves, black roofs, slimy with rain.
Material	Because it was cool now, they would finish the job that day, if they hurried.

In the last two paragraphs, there are six clauses: two relational processes, three material processes and one mental process. In the first relational process, the Attribute "grey" tells us what is the Carrier "the weather" like. The sky was grey. That is to say it is not sunny, and therefore it is not so hot as the first day. In the second relational process, the Attribute "at work early on the cool leads, surrounded by damp drizzling roofs where no one came to sun themselves, black roofs, slimy with rain" shows that it is rainy that day. The following two material processes and one mental process tell us that Tom has suffered some frustration in the above episodes. The word "vicious" suggests that Tom is angry about something and also has a sense of delight of revenge. After reading the novel, we know, as a matter of fact, "you", in the clause of "That's fixed you good and proper" refers to "the woman on the roof", who sunbathes herself everyday. Today it is grey, so she could not sunbathe herself as usual. The last material process tells us that the three workers decide to finish the work in the cool weather as soon as possible.

By analyzing the different processes of the first two paragraphs and the last two paragraphs, something different can be found. In the first two paragraphs, it is hot, and the water steamed, then sizzled. In the last two paragraphs, it is cool and the sky is grey. In the first two paragraphs, they are not used to the hot weather and they are a little dizzy. In the last two paragraphs, they try to finish the work hurriedly. In the first two paragraphs, the woman suns herself on the roof.

In the last two paragraphs, the cool leads are surrounded by damp drizzling roof and no one came to sun themselves. The black roofs are slimy with rain.

When we analyze different processes in the first two paragraphs, we get the conclusion that the following story will be narrated among some conflicts, for example, the hot weather and the three workers, the three workers' terrible working conditions and the woman's comfortable sunbath on the roof, the working class and the bourgeoisie and so on. From the transitivity analysis of the last two paragraphs, we know the conflict between the weather and the three workers has been solved, but the conflict between the different social classes may still exist as time goes by which could be inferred by the sentence "Well, that's fixed you, hasn't it now? That's fixed you good and proper."

When we narrate a story, the "plot" always develops according to the clue of "proposing the conflict--analyzing the conflict--solving the conflict". From the transitivity analysis of the first part of this story, to be specific, from the different process analysis, we can know the series of conflicts, between the hot weather and the three workers, the different social classes and the different genders, all of which make good preparations for the following narration. While in the last two paragraphs of the story, some of the description is a repetition to the first part of the novel, but it is not a simple repetition. The rainy day indicates it is not so hot as the first day. So the conflict between the weather and the worker has been temporarily resolved. There is no direct description about the woman in the last two paragraphs. But the only one mental process actually shows the three workers' attitude towards the woman on the roof, still full of hatred, discontentment and jealousy. So, the hot weather comes to an end, but the tension among the different genders and different social classes still exists.

Plot requires the ability to remember what has already happened, to figure out the relationships between events and people, and to try to project the outcome. Plot is a chain of cause-and-effect relationships that constantly creates a pattern of unified action and behavior. In a word, the story starts with conflicts and ends with the partially resolved conflicts. So, the transitivity analysis of the first part and the last part of the novel proves that the "plot" of this novel conforms to the clue "proposing the conflict--analyzing the conflict--solving the conflict", and the symmetry and balance in this novel pleases us.

3. Conclusion

The analysis mainly focuses on the first two paragraphs and the last two paragraphs. It turns out that the first two paragraphs tell us the background information by introducing different conflicts, such as the conflict between the three workers and the hot weather as well as the terrible working environment, the three workers' hard working on the one roof and the woman's sunbathing herself comfortably on the other roof, etc. The last two paragraphs imply that some conflicts are temporarily resolved and some remain the same, and even worse as time goes by.

In the above discourse analysis from the perspective transitivity analysis, there are two possible levels of achievement to aim at. One is a contribution to the understanding of the novel. Transitivity theory is suitable to explain and interpret the plot development in the novel *A Woman on a Roof*. The higher level of achievement is a contribution to the evaluation of the text.

Robert (2023) figures out that plot is the story which is ordered and well arranged. After the analysis, this novel *A Woman on a Roof* perfectly justifies the definition. From the different process analysis, we can enjoy the symmetry of details in this novel.

To investigate the plot development through transitivity analysis is a tentative and creative study. However, the lack of forerunners in this direction may lead to some shortcomings in this study. Besides, in the future, more quantitative analysis may be required in order to have a comprehensive and thorough understanding of the novel. This paper confirms that transitivity analysis within SFG is a powerful tool in analyzing literary works and it also provides us with a new perspective to appreciate and evaluate literary works. It is strongly hoped that this dissertation can assist the readers in better appreciating this famous novel and other works.

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