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A Discourse Analysis of Official Correspondence in Sino-US Trade Frictions from the Perspective of the Transitivity System

Xiaolu Yin

Pass College of Chongqing Technology and Business University, Chongqing, China

Abstract: Official messages produced during a trade conflict do more than report decisions. Their clause patterns also show who acts, who is affected, and whose conduct appears lawful. Drawing on Halliday's transitivity system, this paper examines six English-language official texts issued by US and Chinese institutions and the World Trade Organization between 2018 and 2020. A qualitative close reading focuses on process types, participant roles, voice, and circumstances. The analysis shows that material processes turn policies and governments into Actors, while their Goals identify the parties said to bear the consequences. US texts frequently present Chinese practices as the source of harm; Chinese texts more often place US tariff measures in that position. When describing their own responses, both sides use circumstances and modal expressions to present action as necessary or procedural. Relational processes define conduct as unfair, discriminatory, or inconsistent with rules, whereas mental and verbal processes construct an image of careful judgment and responsible communication. The WTO report offers a related but more restrained pattern, linking legal classification with a recommended act of compliance. These findings suggest that transitivity is a useful tool for reading official correspondence critically and for teaching business English writers to manage responsibility, tone, and legal positioning.

Keywords: Official Correspondence; Sino-US Trade Frictions; Transitivity System; Critical Discourse Analysis; Business English Teaching.

1. Introduction

A government tariff notice may look very different from an ordinary business letter, yet the two share a basic concern: each must explain an action and make that action acceptable to a reader. During the Sino-US trade frictions, official statements, reports, and meeting interventions became part of the dispute itself. They did not simply describe tariffs after the event. They answered earlier claims, assigned responsibility, and prepared the ground for the next response. Their wording therefore deserves close attention, especially when the same event is described as protection by one side and as a violation by the other.

Systemic functional linguistics provides a practical way to examine this wording. Within Halliday's account of the ideational metafunction, transitivity construes experience through processes, participants, and circumstances [1]. The choice of a material, relational, mental, or verbal process changes what kind of reality a clause presents [2], [3]. Critical discourse analysis adds an institutional question: why might one representation be preferred in a particular setting? Fairclough treats grammatical selection as one means by which social positions become naturalized [4], while van Dijk's work on elite discourse draws attention to the relation between text, cognition, and power [5].

These insights are relevant to professional genres, but official trade correspondence cannot be read as a simple contest between "active" and "passive" voices. Administrative writers also have to record procedures, cite legal provisions, and keep a channel open for further negotiation. Bhatia's account of professional genre is useful here because it allows conventional form and strategic purpose to coexist [6]. A clause may meet a legal requirement and guide interpretation at the same time. The analyst's task is not to guess a writer's private intention, but to explain the representation that the wording makes available.

The paper addresses three questions. First, how do process types and participant roles represent action, evaluation, and reasoning in selected official correspondence? Second, what similarities and differences appear in the US, Chinese, and WTO texts? Third, how can the analysis inform the teaching of business correspondence? After outlining the framework, the paper explains its small corpus and qualitative method. It then discusses material, relational, mental, and verbal processes in turn, with short examples from the documents. The final section considers classroom applications and the limits of the study.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Transitivity System

Transitivity concerns the clause as a representation of experience. Material processes express doing and happening, typically with an Actor and, where relevant, a Goal. Mental processes express sensing, with a Senser and a Phenomenon. Relational processes express being, having, or identification. Verbal processes concern saying and may include a Sayer, a Receiver, and Verbiage. Behavioral processes sit between material and mental experience, while existential processes introduce something as existing [1], [2]. These categories are more than a list of verb meanings. They describe how a whole clause organizes experience.

Participant roles make responsibility visible in different ways. In "the United States raised the tariffs," a government is the Actor and the tariffs are the Goal. A passive alternative, "the tariffs were raised," brings the Goal forward and leaves the Actor unstated. This may redirect attention, but it does not automatically signal concealment. Passives are routine when

an agent is obvious, irrelevant, or already given. Likewise, an active clause can acknowledge duty as well as claim credit. The interpretation must therefore depend on the surrounding text and the institutional situation, not on voice alone.

Circumstances add another layer. Expressions of cause, means, time, and accompaniment can place an action within a larger explanation without making that explanation the main process. In "China had to take tariff measures in response," the material process take is accompanied by a circumstance of cause and the modal expression had to. The response is still an action performed by China, but it is presented as required by circumstances rather than freely chosen. Nominalization can produce a similar compression: technology transfer, obstruction, or compliance packages a series of events into an entity that can then participate in another clause.

Process identification in this study follows the semantic tests discussed by Thompson [3]. The analysis asks what kind of experience the clause construes and then checks the participant configuration. Borderline cases are read in context. For example, found in "the investigation found that …" is treated as a mental process of cognition, while concluded in "the Panel correctly concluded …" also presents an institutional judgment. Projected clauses are not discarded; when they carry the central accusation or legal finding, their own processes are examined as part of the clause complex.

2.2. Transitivity, Genre, and Institutional Meaning

Official correspondence is used here in a broad, functional sense. It includes publicly released reports, press statements, white papers, and formal meeting interventions that address another party or place a position on the official record. Such texts differ in layout and legal force, but they share several genre moves: establishing a background, stating a position, supporting it, and indicating future action. Bhatia's genre perspective helps explain why these moves remain recognizable even when a press release is much shorter than an investigation report [6].

A transitivity reading becomes critical when it connects recurring grammatical patterns with institutional roles. The relevant question is not whether a text contains "bias" in a general sense. It is how a text distributes roles such as Actor, Goal, Senser, and Sayer, and what those distributions make easy or difficult to say. Fairclough's and van Dijk's approaches encourage this connection [4], [5]. At the same time, a single clause cannot carry the whole argument. Patterns must be checked against neighboring clauses, the document's genre, and the stage of the dispute.

The analysis therefore combines four observations for each example: process type, participant assignment, voice, and circumstances. It also notes when one process is projected by another. This combination prevents two common oversimplifications. One is to treat every relational clause as neutral description; the other is to treat every passive as deliberate evasion. Official trade texts are more interesting than either shortcut suggests. Their persuasive force often comes from the ordinary administrative appearance of the wording.

3. Data and Method

The corpus consists of six official English texts published between March 2018 and October 2020, as listed in Table 1. The US materials are the Section 301 investigation findings, a USTR press release on the second tariff tranche, and the US statement on DS543 at the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) [7]–[9]. The Chinese materials are the 2019 white paper on economic and trade consultations and China's DSB statement on DS543 [10], [11]. The WTO panel report in DS543 is included as an institutional reference point [12].

Selection was purposive. Each text addresses the causes of the dispute, the legality of a measure, or the justification of a response, and each belongs to a recognizable chain of official communication. The corpus is not intended to represent every document issued during the frictions. For the Chinese material, the published English versions are analyzed as texts addressed to international readers. The study does not compare them with Chinese originals or treat translation choices as evidence of the original writer's grammatical preferences.

The analysis proceeded through close reading. Passages dealing with causation, harmful effects, legal status, and proposed action were first identified. Relevant clause complexes were then divided into clauses and coded for process and participant roles. Voice, circumstances, modality, and projection were recorded where they affected the representation. Finally, examples from the three institutional sources were compared along the same dimensions. Because the aim is detailed interpretation rather than frequency estimation, the paper does not estimate process frequencies; Table 2 summarizes functions instead of offering a statistical profile.

This design has limits. A small sample cannot establish how common a pattern is across all trade correspondence, and documents drafted by committees do not reflect one person's style. Institutional English translations add another layer of mediation. Moreover, a textual effect is not proof of a deliberate plan to influence readers. These cautions matter. They also make the analysis more useful: claims can stay close to what is visible on the page and open to checking against the cited sources.

Table 1. Official texts selected for analysis

Source	Document	Date	Genre
USTR	Section 301 findings	Mar. 2018	Investigation report
USTR	Second tariff tranche release	Aug. 2018	Press release
U.S. Mission	DSB statement on DS543	Oct. 2020	Official statement
SCIO	China's Position on Consultations	Jun. 2019	White paper
MOFCOM	DSB statement on DS543	Oct. 2020	Official statement
WTO	DS543 panel report	Sep. 2020	Panel report

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. A Functional Map of Process Types

Table 2 maps the main functions found in the selected passages. Material and relational processes carry much of the dispute. The former narrate measures, damage, investigation, and response; the latter attach legal or moral attributes to those measures. Mental and verbal processes often frame the first two by presenting an institution as investigating,

believing, announcing, urging, or recommending. Behavioral and existential processes are less prominent in the passages examined, but they remain useful for describing institutional conduct and introducing a situation as given.

Table 2. Process types and their discourse functions

Process type	Central participants	Main function in the corpus
Material	Actor, Goal	Presents action, impact, and response
Relational	Carrier, Attribute; Token, Value	Defines legality, fairness, and necessity
Mental	Senser, Phenomenon	Presents inquiry, judgment, and belief
Verbal	Sayer, Receiver, Verbiage	Manages announcement, objection, and advice
Behavioral	Behaver	Describes observable conduct
Existential	Existent	Introduces a condition or entity as given
Combined pattern	Process, voice, circumstance	Distributes responsibility in institutional prose

This functional combination fits the genre. Officials need to say what happened, but they also need to establish the category under which an action should be understood. A tariff can be narrated as something one government imposed, classified as a violation, and made the object of a recommendation. No single process type does all this work. The meaning lies in the sequence and in the way participants move from one clause to the next.

4.2. Material Processes and the Allocation of Agency

The clearest example of directed agency appears in the Section 301 findings. USTR states that China's acts, policies, and practices "are unreasonable or discriminatory and burden or restrict U.S. commerce" [7]. In burden or restrict, the long noun phrase naming Chinese conduct is the Actor, and US commerce is the Goal. The grammar places the source of pressure before the affected party. It also allows policies, rather than only individual officials, to perform the action. This is a common feature of institutional prose: an abstract entity becomes the visible cause of material harm.

USTR's press release uses a different arrangement when it turns to its own measures. "USTR today released a list" places the institution in an active material process, and "USTR and the interagency Section 301 Committee sought and received written comments and testimony" gives the same side two further procedural actions [8]. The earlier passive "Changes to the proposed list were made" foregrounds the changes, but the next clause supplies the institutional participants. Read in isolation, the passive might look evasive; read in context, it is part of a careful account of administrative procedure.

The Chinese white paper reverses the direction of the principal action. It states that "the US raised the additional tariffs" and later that "China had to take tariff measures in response" [10]. Both clauses use material processes with explicit national Actors. Their similarity is important because the contrast does not depend on hiding China's own action. Instead, had to and in response frame that action as compelled by a prior move. Responsibility is allocated through the relation between clauses as much as through the Actor–Goal structure within each one.

China's DSB statement makes the consequences equally explicit: US "unilateral tariff measures" have "severely impaired the legitimate interests of numerous Chinese enterprises and damaged the trade relationship" [11]. The measures function as Actor; Chinese enterprises and the bilateral relationship appear as Goals. The phrase taken by the United States keeps the government recoverable as the agent behind those measures. Here the inanimate Actor is not a way of removing human responsibility. It links the harmful effects directly to the policy while preserving the government in a nearby participant role.

The US statement at the 2020 DSB meeting shifts the critical focus to the WTO panel itself. It says that "the Panel failed to conduct a holistic analysis" and that the panel "rejected the U.S. defense" [9]. Panel now occupies the Actor role in clauses about inadequate reasoning. This example warns against expecting every US clause to cast China as Actor and every Chinese clause to cast the United States as Actor. Participants change with the immediate audience and purpose. At this stage of the dispute, the panel's handling of the case has become the action under review.

Across these examples, material processes establish a chain of cause and response. The chain usually begins with the other party's conduct and reaches one's own necessary or procedural action. Yet the texts do not use one grammatical trick uniformly. Active and passive clauses, human and abstract Actors, and circumstances of cause work together. A sound analysis must keep that variation in view.

4.3. Relational Processes and the Definition of Legality

If material processes narrate the dispute, relational processes state what its central entities mean. In the USTR finding quoted above, unreasonable and discriminatory are Attributes assigned to China's acts, policies, and practices [7]. The following material processes then specify their effects on US commerce. Evaluation and consequence are compressed into one clause complex. The wording does not invite the reader to treat "unreasonable" as a personal impression; it appears as the outcome of an investigation and as a statutory category.

MOFCOM uses the same broad resource for an opposing conclusion. Its statement declares that "the United States' unilateral tariff measures are inconsistent with the WTO rules" [11]. The measures are the Carrier and inconsistent with the WTO rules is the Attribute. In the fuller sentence, the Panel is the Senser of correctly concluded, so the relational claim is presented as the content of an expert judgment. This combination matters: the Chinese institution does not merely assert its own classification. It aligns its position with the panel's reasoning.

The WTO report itself is more restrained in vocabulary but no less consequential in structure. Its conclusion finds that "the measures at issue are inconsistent with Articles I:1 and II:1(a) and (b) of the GATT 1994" [12]. The Attributes identify particular treaty provisions rather than broad moral

qualities such as unfairness. The panel then "recommends that the United States bring its measures into conformity with its obligations" [12]. A verbal process of recommendation projects a material process in which the United States must become the Actor of compliance.

The US response to the panel also relies on relational meaning. It calls the report "further confirmation" that the tariff measures "were the only available means" to address the problem [9]. This is not simply a denial of the panel's finding. It replaces one classification with another: the measures are redefined as necessary rather than legally inconsistent. MOFCOM performs a similarly sharp identification when it calls the US appeal "nothing but an abuse of procedural rules" [11]. Relational clauses thus become places where the legal and moral identity of an action is settled, at least within the speaker's account.

For students of business correspondence, this is a useful reminder that be and other relational verbs are not always plain or weak. "The delay is unfortunate," "the delay constitutes a breach," and "the delay is the result of a customs inspection" offer three different versions of an event. They distribute responsibility and seriousness differently without changing the basic fact of delay. Skilled writers need to recognize these differences, especially when a classification may later be quoted as an admission.

4.4. Mental and Verbal Processes: Staging Reasonableness

Mental processes support the image of institutions as careful judges. USTR repeatedly presents the investigation as finding or revealing conditions, while the US DSB statement challenges whether the panel adequately considered the record [7]–[9]. MOFCOM writes "We believe" when interpreting the panel decision and uses "the Panel correctly concluded" when endorsing its legal reasoning [11]. In each case, the Senser is not an individual expressing a private feeling. It is an institution presented as thinking on evidence.

Verbal processes organize the public exchange. USTR releases findings and announces procedures; Chinese statements urge, call upon, and object; the WTO panel recommends [8], [11], [12]. These verbs are not interchangeable labels for speaking. Urge places pressure on a Receiver while leaving the requested action incomplete. Recommend has institutional authority but is formally different from order. Object records disagreement for the next stage of proceedings. Through such choices, correspondence remains part of an ongoing negotiation rather than a closed account of past events.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how selected official correspondence represents the Sino-US trade frictions through transitivity. Material processes connect policies and governments with actions and consequences. Relational processes classify those actions as unreasonable, inconsistent, necessary, or abusive. Mental and verbal processes present institutions as investigators, judges, and responsible participants in an exchange. The WTO text shares these resources but places them within a more formal sequence of legal finding and recommendation.

The comparison reveals neither a fixed national grammar nor a perfectly symmetrical exchange of accusations. US and Chinese texts often reverse the direction of blame, yet they also change their participant choices according to genre and dispute stage. A tariff announcement emphasizes procedure, a white paper constructs a chain of provocation and response, and a DSB intervention evaluates the conduct of the panel or the appellant. Transitivity is most revealing when these local purposes are kept in view.

The findings remain limited by the small English-language corpus and by the interpretive nature of close reading. Further research could test the patterns in a larger dated corpus, compare Chinese originals with official translations, and examine how readers actually respond to alternative clause structures. For teaching, the central lesson is already clear. Grammar is not only a matter of correctness after the content has been chosen. It helps shape the content itself: who acted, why the action seemed necessary, and what kind of judgment the reader is asked to accept.

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