Analyzing transitivity and modality systems in war reporting in a selected 'Israeli' Newspaper report: A Study with Systemic Functional Linguistics' Perspective

Dr. Iyad Issa

iyad.issa.ii@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4552-2120

Abstract:

Investigating transitivity and modality systems help to understand the connection between the structural organization at the clausal level with the ideologies and political views embedded within the text analyzed. This study examines some clauses in a selected report in an Israeli newspaper. This report talks about an Israeli airstrike on Gaza in 2012 killing one family of ten people. The study highlights the high number of passives in the report, and mainly agentless passives, which indicate that the writer did not have a direct access to the event and was just trying to reflect what he believes in by intensifying the use of adverbial modals and passive constructions.

Key words: Newspapers, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Gaza, Palestine, Transitivity, Modality, Passive Construction, Halliday, Ideology

Introduction:

Language plays and important role in the news media and it is affected by ideologies, speech and writing practices (Joseph, 2006). Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is concerned with the study of linguistic forms and their functions in social settings where the way of using grammar is seen as an important resource for meaning and attitudes (Halliday, 1999).

Halliday, (1999) postulates that texts receive the impression from the context and believes that language comprises of three metafunctions: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. In addition, he proposes that transitivity, mood, and theme are interrelated systems of linguistics. One aspect of the components of Halliday's ideational function is transitivity. Transitivity is a grammatical system which concerns with different types of processes that exist in a text in different forms. It deals with the process type, agents and circumstances in any clause which could be analyzed for its mood structure (Eggins, 2004, 1994). Eggins, 2004, (P. 214-215) described the main concerns of analyzing transitivity in a clause as:

1. The selection of a process: e.g., Last year Diana <u>gave</u> blood

2. The selection of participants: e.g., Last year <u>Diana</u> gave <u>blood</u>

3. The selection of circumstances: e.g., <u>Last year</u> Diana gave blood

The transitivity approach distinguishes between two processes the 'doer' of the action, which is called actor, and the goal or what is being 'done to'; "The process may happen by itself or be caused to happen" (Thompson 2004, p.135). Therefore, the construction of the process could be active or passive construction. 'John kicked the ball' is an active action since the subject or actor 'John', comes before the object 'ball'. The other construction is called passive one which is transformed from the active construction such as 'The ball was kicked by John'. In this case, the verb takes the passive form and the object comes before the subject or could be deleted.

Richardson (2007) proposed that English has four principal types of verbs and; consequently, four types of processes in different sentences. There are verbal processes such as 'speaking', mental processes such as 'thinking', relational processes such as 'have', and material processes which can be transitive involving two or more participants like 'kick', or intransitive with only one participant such as 'run, fly'.

The second aspect that will be investigated in this study is 'Modality' which "forms the counter-part of transitivity, referring to judgments, comment and attitude in text and talk, and specifically the degree to which a speaker or writer is committed to the claim he or she is making" (Richardson, 2007, p. 59). Thus, modality shows the relationship between the content and function, and it is expressed by the use of modal verbs (e.g., may, could, should, will and must), their negations (e.g., may not, couldn't, etc.), or through adverbs (e.g., certainly) (Thompson 2004, p.135). In addition, modality could be expressed into two forms: Truth modality, such as "this war can be stopped If the people intervene in the political process", and obligation modality which refers to future events such as "Children's rights ought to take precedence over the profit motive of private- sector companies" (Richardson, 2007, p. 60)

Modality plays an essential role to bridge the gap between knowledge and power reflected in the text. Hodge and Kress (1993, P. 122) indicated that "Modality in general establishes the degree of authority of an utterance. The modal auxiliaries (May, must, can, etc.) perform this function, but they contain a systematic ambiguity about the nature of authority whether it is based primary on knowledge or on power". As a result, modality system can reflect the knowledge or power of the writer and the text. Using modals in sentences could change the meaning and the power behind the text such as:

John is able to eat (represents the speaker's knowledge)

John is allowed to eat (indicates a permission)

John must eat (indicates a compulsion or a speaker's prediction) (Hodge & Kress, 1993, p. 122).

Background of the study:

English Newspapers in Israel are usually directed to the foreign readers, and especially the English-speaking people and the media agencies. The way that the event is written down and described has significant impact on readers, especially the readers from outside the region. In order to understand and analyze such news reports and coverages, we should be aware of the political and ideological background of the event and the editor. Hodge & Kress (1993, P. 15) defines ideology as it "mediates and naturalizes contradictions, and normally it appears as a complex, as a set of contradictory elements

or versions of physical and social reality". They considered ideology as a representation of reality and they asked "How then can ideology be defined without a prior description of the truth? All such descriptions involve language, and presenting anything in or through language involves selection" (Hodge & Kress, 1993, p. 15).

The origin of the conflict in Palestine goes back to the year 1948 when UK ended its mandate over Palestine in 14/05/1948, and declared its intention to establish a homeland for Jews in Palestine. In 15/05/1948 the Zionist gangs who were supported by UK and well-armed, and well-organized declared the foundation of 'State of Israel' on 80% of historic Palestine after killing thousands and dispossessing most of the Palestinian people. In 1967 Israel has occupied the rest of historic Palestine; Gaza and West Bank. Most of the Palestinians were dispossessed and were forced to run away outside Palestine (Al-Awda, n.d.). Although, the Palestinians agreed to sign a peace agreement with Israel in 1991, Israel did not allow the Palestinians to have their own independent state.

The study:

In November 2012, Israel warplanes pounded a residential house in Gaza killing 12 members of Al Dalu family (Wikipedia, 2012). On 11th November, 2012, Elior Levy, an Israeli writer, wrote a news report in 'Israel News', an English Newspaper, about the death of this family resulting from the Israeli airstrike on Gaza (Levy, 2012).

In this study, I investigated some transitivity and modality systems used in this report, i.e., the underlying structure which accounts for the organization of a text or discourse (Eggins, 2004). In order to examine the modality and transitive system used in the Israeli report, I investigated some clauses which represent events and processes of various kinds of actions such as: How the action is performed, by whom and on what?

The Report Analysis:

The report's title, "5 women, 4 children killed in Gaza strike", contains one significant transitive action verb process. The transitive action process 'killed' is expressed as a passive construction without an agent. This transitive process results in a degree of ambiguity and imprecision since the doer is hidden. It is clear that we are only told about the affected subjects (killed women and children), but not the active agent of the reported event. The role of the Israeli army as a doer or actor has been deleted entirely from this title.

Using the passive construction involves a great deal of ambiguity and that reflects the writer's ideology to give the impression that what happened is natural, and to avoid putting the Israeli army in a position of killer. The question about the absence of the actor is revealed by asking: Who killed the children and the women in Gaza? The active role of the Israeli army is transformed or changed to a natural relation. In terms of transitivity, the Israeli air force was deleted to mislead the readers about the Israel's violent transitive action. The actor (Israeli Air Force) is removed by using passive verb phrase 'were killed'.

In the second part of the title; "Air Force missile hits residential building in Gaza, kills 11 Palestinians. Hamas vows to avenge their deaths", 'Air Force' is independent and personalized, while the agent (actor) is depersonalized. 'Air force' cannot have an existence independent of people. The action of the 'Air Force' is represented metaphorically as an agent. 'hits' is a transitive action processes without agents; therefore, the question is: Who is hitting the residential building in Gaza? On the other hand, the reporter has applied active construction such as: "Hamas vows to avenge their deaths", "A spokesman for the Hamas-run Interior Ministry said", "The massacre of the Dalu family will not pass without punishment," Hamas's armed wing said in a statement". The editor used two transitive processes. At the beginning, he used the passive voice where he deleted the agent, and in the second part, he used the active voice to highlight the importance of what has been said by Hamas. The active construction was used to foreground or highlight the reaction of Hamas as a possible actor in the future and as the most active participant in the processes while Israeli soldiers were represented as passive participants who did not act upon others.

"At least 11 Palestinian civilians, including four children, were killed on Sunday in what Hamas said was an Israeli airstrike on a Gaza apartment building, Palestinian reports said". The writer used again the passive verb phrases which reflect his ideological background to hide the doer. The specific language construction used by the writer implies that he did not have a direct access to the event and was trying to convince the reader that he is not sure about the actor and that indicates a "potential action; hence it allows for the possibility failure" (Hodge & Kress, 1993, p. 130)

Once again, the writer kept using passive verb phrases and deleting the actor of the attack such as: "Five women, including one 80-year-old, and four small children were among the dead, said Gaza health official Ashraf al-Kidra. It was further reported that seven of the dead were members of the same family and that 25 people were hurt in the attack".

In the following clauses, "The IDF (Israeli Defense Force) initially said that the head of Hamas' rocket unit Yahia Rabia was killed in the strike but it later corrected itself saying he is a high-ranking operative within the unit and was possibly not even hurt in the strike", the reporter used again the passive voice to hide the agent (was killed). It is clear, that he was not reporting from the place of the event, but reporting what the Israeli Army said. Starting the clause by saying' initially said' and then 'but later corrected itself' and using the probability adverb 'possibly' refers to the speaker's attitude or his opinion about the truth expressed in the sentence. Richardson, (2007) postulates that modal verbs and adverbs provide a judgment of an event and that judgment may reflect the ideology and the background of the writer.

The following clause "A Gaza source said that the target was apparently Jamal Mohammed Yassin Dalu, 50, an engineer. Dalu is likely linked to the rocket unit. However, the source said that Dalu and Rabia are not connected" is ambiguous since the resource of information is not known. The writer used more adverbial modals 'apparently and likely' which reflect a reduced certainty about the relation between 'Jamal' and 'the rocket unit'. In the second clause, the writer is again not sure about the connection between the two men 'Jamal and Yahia'. This ambiguity heightens the sense of the importance of this strike and views it as a natural and normal response.

By intensifying the use of adverbial models (e.g., apparently, possible, equally as likely), the writer was trying to justify the strike by indicating that the Israeli Army was right, but there was a mistake targeting the right place.

"It is possible there are more bodies under the rubble, including that of Rabia. There were no reports about him in Gaza".

Using the adverbial modal 'possible' in the previous clause indicated ambiguity and suspicion about whether there were killed people under the rubble. It seems that the writer was trying to convince the reader in a propagandistic way that those people were terrorists, and the strike was an important step ignoring the fact that the strike was against residential apartments, and the victims were innocent children and women.

The writer put the Palestinians in a position that they were responsible for the strike "It is possible that the IDF bombed the wrong building but it is equally as likely that the Palestinians are withholding information about the residents of the building". The definite article (the IDF) triggers a presupposition that the IDF (Israeli defense Force) bombed the wrong building. This clause reflects the writer's belief that this strike was acceptable and natural response and it targeted some terrorists.

The writer's assessment "but it is equally as likely that the Palestinians are withholding information about the residents of the building" is unclear. This ambiguity, actually, results in an epistemically weaker claim than if the writer chose not to moralize the verb.

In the following clauses, "Hamas' military wing vowed to avenge the Palestinians' deaths and stated that "the massacre will not go unpunished." The IDF did not comment on the attack", the wrier shifts the attention from the main event, killing the family, to Hamas' reaction. There is a hidden or presupposed meaning in the text. The quality of the reporting suffers and reflects the writer's ideology more than describing an event as it is shown in the following clauses:

"Meanwhile, Palestinian sources are reporting that Air Force jets fired warning missiles near the house of Marwan Issa, a senior operative in Hamas' military wing". "Issa has been mentioned as one of the possible successors of Ahmed Jabari. The strike on Issa's house was carried out following a direct order by IDF chief of Staff Benny Gantz to hit Hamas officials".

Discussion:

The exaggerated overuse of adverbial modals and passive constructions, and mainly agentless passives, reflect the writer's attitude and ideological background and his trials to justify attacking and killing Palestinian civilians. (Hodge & Kress, 1993, p. 131) proposes that using passive construction "draws attention to the fact that have event or process nature of a verb is not an absolute matter, but a rather delicate and finely balanced one".

In the present report, the writer used many adverbial modals such as (possibly, equally, and likely), which is a complex modality. Modality reflects the speaker's belief and attitude towards what is he writing about (Quirk, et al., 1985). For example, saying that "You possibly don't stink. This is roughly

equivalent to I think you are stink, but I am giving you the benefit of the doubt" (Hodge & Kress, 1993, p. 137).

Conclusion:

The 'Israeli' reporter used transitivity and modality systems at the level of syntax to evoke different responses in the reader. He tried to shift the attention from killing the family to connect between Palestinians and terrorism to justify the death of this family. The reporter utilized passive construction in the hope of shifting the reader's attention away from the Israeli Army who committed the violent action. Israeli soldiers were represented as passive participants who did not act upon others, and on the other hand, Palestinians were used as active participants and were highlighted through the text. The reporter employed the strategy of repetition of 'Hamas' throughout the text in order to convince the reader that this movement is responsible for what happened.

Bibliography

1. Al-Awda, T. P. R. t. R. C., n.d. Al-Awda, The Palestine Right to Return Coalition. [Online] Available at: http://www.al-awda.org/[Accessed 27 February 2013].
2. Eggins, S., 1994. An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics. London: Printer Publishers London.
3. Eggins, S., 2004. An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics. New York: continuum International Publishing Group.
4. Halliday, M. A. K., 1999. Text & Context in Functional Linguistics-The Notion of "Context" in Language Education. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing Company.
5. Hodge, R. & Kress, G., 1993. Language as Ideology. New York: Routledge.
6. Joseph, J. E., 2006. Language and Politics, The Handbook of Applied Linguistics. Edinburgh: University Press.
7. Levy, E., 2012. Ynetnews. [Online] Available at: http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4307988,00.html[Accessed 02 March 2013].
8. Quirk, R., Grrenbaum, S., Leech, G. & Savartvic, J., 1985. A comprehensive Grammar of the English Language. London: Longman.
9. Richardson, J. E., 2007. Analysing Newspapers An Approach from critical discourse analysis. New York: Palgrave Macmilian.
10. Thompson, G., 2004. Introducing Functional Grammar. New York: Arnold, a member of the Hodder Headline Group.
11. Wikipedia, 2012. Wikipedia. [Online] Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Dalu_family_killing[Accessed 15 3 2013].

APPENDIX

5 women, 4 children killed in Gaza strike

Air Force missile hits residential building in Gaza, kills 11 Palestinians. Hamas vows to avenge their deaths

Elior Levy / Published: 11.18.12, 20:03 / Israel News

At least 11 Palestinian civilians, including four children, were killed on Sunday in what Hamas said was an Israeli airstrike on a Gaza apartment building, Palestinian reports said.

Five women, including one 80-year-old, and four small children were among the dead, said Gaza health official Ashraf al-Kidra. It was further reported that seven of the dead were members of the same family and that 25 people were hurt in the attack.

A spokesman for the Hamas-run Interior Ministry said an Israeli missile wrecked the three-storey residential building.

"The massacre of the Dalu family will not pass without punishment," Hamas's armed wing said in a statement.

The IDF initially said that the head of Hamas' rocket unit Yahia Rabia was killed in the strike but it later corrected itself saying he is a high-ranking operative within the unit and was possibly not even hurt in the strike.

A Gaza source said that the target was apparently Jamal Mohammed Yassin Dalu, 50, an engineer. Dalu is likely linked to the rocket unit. However, the source said that Dalu and Rabia are not connected.

Four kids killed in strike (Photo: AFP)

It is possible there are more bodies under the rubble, including that of Rabia. There were no reports about him in Gaza.

It is possible that the IDF bombed the wrong building but it is equally as likely that the Palestinians are withholding information about the residents of the building.

Hamas' military wing vowed to avenge the Palestinians' deaths and stated that "the massacre will not go unpunished." The IDF did not comment on the attack.

Meanwhile, Palestinian sources are reporting that Air Force jets fired warning missiles near the house of Marwan Issa, a senior operative in Hamas' military wing.

Issa has been mentioned as one of the possible successors of Ahmed Jabari. The strike on Issa's house was carried out following a direct order by IDF chief of Staff Benny Gantz to hit Hamas officials.

Palestinian sources also reported that 19 people were killed in IDF strikes in Gaza and 66 in total since the beginning of Operation Pillar of Defense.

Medics in Gaza said that the two men who were killed in the strike were civilians and not members of Hamas or the Islamic Jihad. **Reuters and AP contributed to this report**

http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4307988,00.html