

SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR: MATERIAL PROCESS ANALYSIS IN EFL TEXTBOOKS FOR PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN

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Abstract

Texts in English language textbooks for Palestinian refugees were analyzed for the types of verbal process expressed within the clauses of the texts, as well as for their concomitant participants and processes, using the system of transitivity from Systemic Functional Linguistics. The focus was on texts which present references to Palestine whether as participant type or location. The material process and its corresponding participants were analyzed experientially and semantically to explore the experiences through which the Palestinian context is presented in those texts. It has been observed that the semantic connotations of the process presentations are limited to specific themes that in turn limit the aspirations of the learners and their identity constructing aspects through the textbooks. This focus on how language constructs experience can be drawn on in future drafting of teaching materials for different collectives in a way which can be more sensitive to identity formation.

Keywords: CDA, SFL, Identity, EFL Textbooks, Palestinian refugees

INTRODUCTION

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a well-established approach that studies the close relationship between language, specifically text, and people's perception of society. Because language is the most common tool used to communicate, it needs to be able to transmit our cultural and contextual issues. This is no less true in the case of a foreign language; that is, when people are learning another language, they need to be able to find expression for their own cultural and contextual issues. In this light, language can be thought of as a method that aids individuals to impart meaning; however, this cannot happen without context being taken into consideration. According to Malinowski (Malinowski, 1923, 1935), as cited in Martin, 2001:151), "you cannot understand the meaning of what someone says or writes unless you know something about the context in which it is embedded". This statement is essential to this study as it drives the point home that educators play a large role in how students receive their knowledge in classrooms.

This study focuses on English language teaching materials designed for classroom use with Palestinian refugees. According to Celi (2016) "it is urgent to establish awareness among educators in the educational arena regarding the critical identification of values in books since, from a linguistic perspective, texts construe – besides a source for Grammar and Lexis learning – a reservoir of ideological content about social status, work, family, gender, and some other crucial socioeconomic issues to be acquired and reproduced." After an in-depth analysis of foreign language textbooks, Curdt-Christiansen and Weninger (2015:5) concluded that the sociocultural discourse embedded in textbooks which have been approved by institutions has a direct impact on influencing identity. For example, Deroo and Diaz (2021) used an analysis of the system of transitivity from Systemic Functional Linguistics to examine how language choices frame immigrant identity in an 11th-grade U.S. history textbook. They found that "across the textbook, European immigrants are provided with more opportunities through verb processes to act, feel, sense, and be, as compared to Latinx immigrants" (Deroo and Diaz, 2021:1). The authors further argue that the transitivity choices construct certain types of immigrants as more desirable than others. Thus, using the system of transitivity from SFL, the materials were analyzed for the types of verbal process expressed within the clauses of the texts, as well as for their concomitant participants and processes. Halliday has classified the types of processes expressed through verbs in clauses in language communication into six types: Material, Relational, Mental, Verbal, Existential and Behavioral, with corresponding participants for each. One of the most salient types of processes is the one involving physical actions: eating, drawing, jogging, and so on. These are clauses that encode a material process, which mandatorily express a doing or a happening (process) and may be accompanied by a number of different participant types. According to Halliday (1994:110) "material processes are processes of 'doing'." They express the notion that some entity 'does' something, which may be done 'to' some other entity. The

agent who or which does the action or the happening is the *actor*, while the *goal* is most likely the direct object as traditionally identified. Material processes are not essentially concrete, physical events; they may be abstract. Further, material processes can be in active or passive voice.

This article shows the application of an analysis of material processes in the English language teaching textbooks used to teach Palestinian refugees. The background to the study is explained, then the quantitative results of the analysis of the material processes and the associated participant types. This is followed by more in-depth analysis and discussion of the semantics expressed through experiential representations of the material process. At times, the significance of those findings is put forward drawing on the results of the analysis of a comparable data set of reading texts from the same textbooks, which do not encode any Palestinian representation and references within (labeled as non-Palestinian texts data set). This non-Palestinian texts data set was similarly analyzed in the same manner as the Palestinian texts. The findings suggest a limited range of activities introduced to Palestinian refugee children in texts in which the context encompasses Palestinian aspects, be it characters or locations; thus, the argument is that these refugee children may, while learning English as an additional language, also be learning a circumscribed Palestinian identity.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Palestinian refugee children in Lebanon, namely those who go to United Nations (UN) agency schools purposefully established for them in Lebanon, study English as a second language from textbooks that were authored specifically for them. Those books are based on a hybrid curriculum: the host country curriculum, (the Lebanese National curriculum, 1997) and a UN curriculum which reflects UN values, such as neutrality, human rights, tolerance, equality and non-discrimination (United Nations Global Issues, 2010) with regard to race, gender, language and religion, in addition to the specific principles of the Palestinian identity and Palestinian cultural heritage. Both “curricula” intersect in the values, principles, objectives, and competences of critical thinking, communication, problem solving, tolerance, and citizenship, among others. The reading texts in grade 1 to 6 EFL textbooks added up to 318 reading texts, out of which 14 included a reference to Palestine whether as a country, a town, a village or even as a nationality of a character. These 14 texts were analyzed to examine the experiential processes presented, using SFL, namely the material process type and its corresponding participant types from both ideational and semantic perspectives. The UAM CorpusTool¹ is a software that was used for annotation of the text corpora. It was developed by O’Donnell (2009).

¹ UAM CorpusTool is a set of tools for the linguistic annotation of text, Version 2.8 (May 2012) Mick O’Donnell (<http://www.corpustool.com/>).

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Analysis of the 14 texts showed that the material process was presented as the most dominant of the process types, and consequently its corresponding participants were the most prevalent. Material processes took up 45% of the process types across the texts. The verbs of “happenings” and “doings” that are associated with this process type add up to 207 verbs, within which some verbs are more recurrent than others.

As explained, each of the process types has its own set of participants. Material processes are processes which, semantically, convey meanings of happening and doing, i.e., they construe some entity as involved in a happening or as undertaking a given action; accordingly, additional insights will be concluded in relation to the characters corresponding to the material process. The participant types associated with the material process are mainly, Actor, Goal, Scope, Beneficiary, Initiator, Instrument, and Resulting Attribute. The participant types were layered into two additional layers, person and non-person, and then the person participant's nationality was identified and annotated accordingly. It is worth noting that this article focuses mainly on the person types only.

The participant type Actor was the most frequent of all of the participant types, at 17.7%. The Actors were then divided into person and non-person types, with Actor Person at 85.3% and the remaining 14.7% encoding Actor non-Person. Actor Persons were then further analyzed into their specified nationality. For example, in the clause *Woroud began running at school in her hometown*, these different layers of annotation resulted in *Woroud* being tagged as Actor, Person, Palestinian nationality. The additional layering of nationality annotation identified the 85.3% Actor Person to be 74.8% Actor Person Palestinian, 16.5% Actor Person Palestinian American, 5.2% Actor Person Unstated-Nationality, and 3.6 % other nationalities such as Palestinian-Australian, Lebanese, Greek, and multi-national, at 0.9% each.

On the other hand, the total Goal participant type, for example, *...introduce to you Jumana el Hussein*, comprised 11.8% of the total participant types. Out of that figure, with further analysis as with all participant types, Person, non-Person and nationality where applicable, the analysis yielded that 11.8% of Goal is distributed into 92% Goal non-Person leaving Goal Person with 8%. The 8% Goal Person participant type was divided into 86% as Goal Person Palestinian and 14% Goal Person Palestinian-American.

Another participant type that can appear in material processes is Beneficiary. The Beneficiary is the recipient of something expressed through the process. For example, in the clause *Their music has received many awards* ‘*Their music*’ is a non-Person Beneficiary. As with the other participant types for the Material process, the Beneficiary participant type, which in total is 2.4% of all process types participants, was layered into Person and non-Person. The further layering of the 2.4% yielded Beneficiary Person participant type

94.7% and the remaining 5.3% as non-Person in the Palestinian texts; the further analysis of nationalities of the 94.7% Beneficiary Person showed 3 nationalities identified as follows: 50% are Palestinian Beneficiary Person, 33% are Palestinian-American Beneficiary Person, and 17% are American Beneficiary Person.

A quick conclusion in relation to the nationality recurrence and mention would yield the presence of the dual nationality of Palestinian with other nationalities, rather than another nationality with other nationalities. Also, most of the Goal and Beneficiary participant types are non-person; however, those which are annotated as person are mainly Palestinian. In other words, the impact of those “doings” and “happenings” are mainly exclusively within the same circle of the agent and, interestingly enough, the same is the case with the non-person Goal and Beneficiary participant types. This will be further examined and analyzed from a semantic perspective in the following section.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

A more qualitative analysis entails examining the processes and participants from a semantic perspective by exploring the lexical presentations. To begin with, there are the verbs dictating the process from a semantic perspective with their connotations, and the messages conveyed within. It can be noted that 45.5% material processes are comprised of 207 associated verbs in the Palestinian texts data set. For the Palestinian texts data set, some verbs are more recurrent than others, even though the number is relatively large (207 verbs); some of these repeated verbs are: “received”, “live”, “write”, “participated”, “began to”, “get”, “write”, “represent”, “embroidered”, “moved”, “specialized”, “graduates”, “published”, “read”, and “study” among others.

The “happenings” and “doings” that have been reflected in the Palestinian texts through Material processes were semantically more related to mainstream day-to-day activities that did not incorporate the notion of initiation, discovery or invention (as was the case in the texts that centered on non-Palestinian experiences), but rather, “studying”, “receiving”, “working”, “competing”, “running”, “embroidering”. Given that “education plays a crucial role in shaping and constructing individual’s identities” (Esmaeeli, Razmjoo, Valizadeh, et al 2021:2), the exposure through the Palestinian texts to these kinds of ‘doings’ may play a role in the way in which the children view their Palestinian identity. According to the verbs, the characters in the Palestinian texts, with which the learners will be familiarized since they are Palestinian or live within a Palestinian context, whether Actors, Goals or Beneficiaries, among others, are entailed to “doings” or “happenings” that are within the general themes of Sports, and Arts and Culture, for example. Cortez (2008) highlights the importance of the propagated messages in both what is presented and what is not presented as very critical, saying, “Because what is not included in the construction of a character through text is as important as what is included”; it can be argued that the Palestinian identity is not constructed

around activities involving “innovation”, “invention”, and “entrepreneurship”, as is the case with texts revolving around non-Palestinians used in the same textbooks. In other words, pioneering outside the mainstream activities is not incorporated for the Palestinian context but it is for other collectives. From the perspective of identity, these portrayals convey some secondary information which unconsciously influence the identity in the mind of language learners, especially the target age group who are in the process of their identity formation (Esmaeeli, Razmjoo, Valizadeh, et al 2021). In sum, the activities in which Palestinians are constructed through the verb choices seem to equate being Palestinian with doing sports, music and culture, and may convey the message that being a successful Palestinian means being involved in these kinds of activities, rather than in others.

An additional perspective is the recurrence of passivization. In the Palestinian data set, 15% of material process verbs are presented in passive voice, such as “has been awarded”, “has been given”, “is given”, “is offered”, “was named”, “were embroidered”, “were taught”, “were made”, and “have been translated”; also, most of the future verb tense is presented in passive voice, such as “will be loaded”, “will be discarded”, “will be taken”. This finding is worth noting once compared with the percentage of the passivization recurrence in the texts which do not present the Palestinian experience across the reading texts in the textbooks, which is 1.7%. The recurrence of passivization in the Palestinian texts, which the Palestine refugee children are expected to familiarize themselves with, is a connotation of a missing agent for the “doings” and accepting “happenings” as occurring to a recipient or a beneficiary. It is worth noting in this context that passivization is most often viewed as the syntactic construction that changes the word order in such a way that the constituent with the patient role (or the Goal) is placed in the position usually occupied by the grammatical subject. Given that English has a relatively fixed word order, passivization is used to put the Goal in initial clause position. However, a difference should be made between the languages with the so-called fixed word order, as this is almost the only way to place their patient initially, and those with the so-called free word order where case endings enable the initial placement of the patient even without passivization; however, given that English has a relatively fixed word order, passivization is used to put the Goal in initial clause position. Examining passivization from another perspective, Celi (2016) describes its recurrence in “texts as not evoking values regarding young people’s empowerment. Instead, young people are mostly portrayed as submissive and passive beings”. Projecting this quote to this study, one can infer that the frequency of passivization is a means of accentuating the concept of agentlessness and, to be more specific in the Material process, the leaving out of “Actor”, which means that it is normal to proceed as if there were no “Actor” to be encountered, or that the “Actor” in relation to self-actualization as being engaged in “activation” (Ismaeeli *et al.*, 2015) is not critical in the course of action; it rather deters the identity and the implications of the action perpetuated in the material processes clause, as in the examples “the same patterns were taught from mother to daughter”;

“...which is offered by the University of...”. This point takes us to the doers of the actions, namely the participant types for the Material process type for both data sets.

Further semantic analysis has shown that most of the “Actor type” is presented in the forms of pronouns rather than proper nouns, 89 times out of 142, which is more than 62%. The individual 1st person singular “I” comprises approximately 35% of the pronouns and around 23% of the total number of the Actor participant type; on the other hand, the 1st person plural “we” comprises approximately 16% of the pronouns and around 10% of the total number of the Actor Participant type. Celi (2016) describes the 1st Person singular “I” as the “Nuclear I” and describes collective nouns on the other hand as “Marginal Nouns” whereof in the latter the focus is on the topic rather than the participants themselves, i.e. the marginal nouns are identified through the main topics of the clauses they are engaged in, in other words through the “happenings” and the “doings”; they are not as highlighted as are the nuclear nouns or pronouns. As for the “Nuclear I”, the Actors in those specific clauses are the “agenting” of the “happening”, which is executed or fulfilled individually rather than collectively, vis-à-vis no bonded community for doing or causing a happening, feeding into the construction of individual identity, which may not help reinforce a Palestinian collective identity. This emphasizes the point that has been raised above concerning individuality and collectivity in relation to bonding and to additional engagement and support for the “Actor” person with the Palestinian nationality who is the doer of the action. This could imply that the “doings” or “happenings” are done in isolation of a community or a group, or there is no common consensus or harmony among the group so that those are done collectively. Furthermore, in this regard and in relation to identity formation, individual identity is developed or insinuated for action; according to Herman (2011), “self-concept, personality development, and values are all closely related to identity formation”, but in this case, there is a connotation of isolation, and the recurrence of individuality in this framework accentuates remoteness, in other words vulnerability, keeping in mind that the recipients (readers of the texts which encode those presentations) of those contexts – the refugee students – are already a community that is fragmented without an overarching governing circle which could empower such individuality, and thus guide and embrace equipping and nurturing them. Their whole community is separated and dispersed. On another note, collective and plural nouns are present as well, such as family, people, women, and athletes, among others comprising of 12% of the total number of Actor participant type; in other words, there are some group constructions through collective and plural nouns, but those are minimal compared to the individual “Nuclear I”.

Individuation is also a critical part of identity formation, and it may be presented in proper nouns. Proper nouns were only mentioned 14 times, comprising 11% of the Palestinian Actors (with some recurrent more than twice); for example the musician Wissam Jubran, and the poet Mahmoud Darwich, both received worldwide accolades, acknowledging their achievements in the field of art.

Additionally, as a matter of fact, the specific domains which they have excelled in are individual domains as a poet or a musician rather than in groups, be it a band for example or any kind of cooperative work. The use of proper nouns is mainly to give specificity to the characters and additional knowledge to better build information; this entails their institution in the center position of the “doings” and “happenings”, whereof “the information status of an entity influences its salience in discourse and to some extent determines whether and how it will be referred in subsequent discourse.” (Xu, 2015:1). However, it could be concluded that the minimal number of recurrences of proper nouns imply the marginality of the identified Actor in Material process. Pronoun use, according to Celi (2016), creates a more generic orientation in those texts aiming at being shared by most of the users of the texts, since the “actions” and “doings” presented in those texts are more likely related to normality and affiliation. Celi (2016), in her study analyzing formality and normality in EFL textbooks, states that pronouns are used when the authors presuppose that the readers or textbooks users are already engaged in some specific topics; thus, there is no need to further accentuate affiliation; however, proper nouns are used to better describe the target characters and the values they would be upholding. Accordingly, the number of recurrences of proper nouns in the Palestinian texts is within the contexts of Arts, Cultural Heritage and Sports. This implies that it was taken for granted that the children will already be familiar with those characters and topics as they are within the normality of their mainstream life and values to be upheld, especially given that many specific names are recurrent more than once, such as “Iman” within the Cultural Heritage general theme, and “Woroud” in the general theme Sports, among others. As a result, this finding emphasizes the difference in values which are encoded through the material processes in the texts; namely the characters engaged in the non-Palestinian data set are presented in different contexts, settings and under different general themes, such as invention, innovation, entrepreneurship, astronomy and space travel. Even though they are “Actors”, as are those in the Palestinian texts data set, the contexts in which they are “agenting”, i.e. the “happening” and the “doings”, show a different weighting of values, in other words, the incorporated identity factors which feed into the formation aspects which are being profoundly propagated.

Another perspective on the Material process is that of Actor – Goal, to examine the spectrum of impact for these “doings” and “happenings”. It has been observed that these actions – “doings” and “happenings”, which the “Actor” participant type in this process has executed, do not influence or impact other Person(s) outside the “Actor” circle, but rather objects and inanimate things. They do not impact and initiate a change on other Persons or at a global level, for example, “hundreds of dresses”, “blown glass”, “objects for everyday use”, “poems”, and “all the oranges”, among others. As for the Goal Person, in the Palestinian texts data set, there are six of them, as an example, “my family of six”, “to their daughters”, “my Palestinian grandmother”, among others. Semantically speaking, the Goal Person types are constrained to a limited number of affected and within the immediate circle of the Actor, rather than an expanded circle, or those which would suggest an impact on the world.

The Beneficiary participant type in the Palestinian text data set was investigated in the corresponding Material type processes as well and further analyzed semantically. The Beneficiary Persons in the Palestinian texts (9 Beneficiary Palestinian Person) are also restricted to limited Persons; in some instances, they are not identified but presented with 3rd Person singular pronouns, such as “he”, “you”, and “I”, “to their daughters”, “to daughter” and in fewer instances, “Wissam Jubran”, in the context of the general themes of cultural heritage and arts. Oyserman, Elmore & Smith (2012: 69) argue that “part of identity is the way one sees oneself through the roles in life”, and thus this consistency in the construction of Palestinian characters throughout the textbooks may influence the way in which the Palestine refugee children relate to their national identity. One can conclude that there is a consistency in the presentation of the different components of this process type, at the level of the verb semantic connotations, and participant types. There is a permanence of restriction whether in the “actions” themselves, being mainstream activities, or the “Actors” roles, or even the impact of those actions on the “Goal” and the “Beneficiaries”. It has been observed that the general theme contexts are “Arts”, “Sports”, “Cultural Heritage” among others, and the impact is confined to the immediate circle of those “Actors”. Also worth mentioning is the recurrence of passivization which is additional means for reducing the agency of the action. The “doings” and “happenings” that are presented in the passive voice where the “Beneficiary” or the “Goal” is a Palestinian participant mirrors the fact that the Palestine refugee children rely on donations from countries without actually knowing who in particular is supporting them. They are identified as refugees and the donors are identified with their countries, governments, and nations, in other words with a solid identification, whereas the refugees are not. Accordingly, passivization is a normal aspect of their day-to-day life. Individuality was presented in the reading texts as well, in the form of pronouns, 1st person singular pronouns, as referred to earlier as “Nuclear I”; in other words, it is alone, and thus mirrors the status of Refugees, having an individual status as their belonging to a wider group is not attained as well.

Using the same lens to interpret those results from an identity formation factor perspective for a Palestinian refugee child, sitting in a classroom in the camp, with an insurmountable faith that education will unquestionably better their future, it could be easily concluded that no matter how enormous their efforts are, those examples propagate the message that their achievements are limited in specific fields. The use of the marginal nouns, participants who benefit from the process (Matthiessen 1995:210), whether in the passive clauses or where the noun is in the position of a beneficiary participant type for example, “my grandmother taught me (me is marginal being the Beneficiary), is minimal where the Actor is as emphasized as the ‘doing’, rather than being identified by the action topic of the activity itself. The same applies to the use of pronouns; the equal recurrences in both the Nuclear “I” and the “we” may yield the significance of both the group and the individual equally, rather than bound to one pattern over the other. In other words, if there were equal

recurrences in both the Nuclear “I” and the “we”, then that perhaps could highlight the significance of both the group and the individual equally, rather than using one pattern more than the other.

The Palestinian Goal Persons in the Palestinian texts are as follows, “introduce Jumana el Husseini”, “feed my family of six”, “teach their daughters”, “introduce to you an award-winning Palestinian-American Poet”, “met my Palestinian grandmother”, “carry them on our backs”. Accordingly, the implications of the Goals in this data set are limited to the activity itself or the impact of the activity itself. This is noticed when compared to other examples in the non-Palestinian texts data set in which the Goal of the process is wider than the activity. For example, “the surface of the moon” and “Walt Disney World”...

The resulting Attribute in the Palestinian texts data set is related to achievements which reflect the general themes of the texts, for example, “as master string Instrument maker” in the general theme “arts and culture”, as well as the examples, “a lot about Palestinian embroidery”, and “laureate of the 2013 NSK prize for Children...”. Another resulting Attribute is related to achievements in the text related to the general theme “sports”, “seventh in the 500m race”, and “in the 12th place in the 500m race”. The achievements mentioned in the Palestinian texts are more at a personal level rather than at the worldwide level; these can be compared to the resulting Attributes in the non-Palestinian text, which are more into world-wide events, whether an astronaut or the TV.

CONCLUSION

For the material process, the transitivity profile allows for an in-depth exploration of the presentation of the Palestinian participants, the contexts with which they are bound and their roles in those contexts. The contexts they are identified with are related to Sports, Arts, and Cultural Heritage, and their Goals are either to meet every day needs, or prove themselves worthy in dire conditions, as the case is with the text about a Palestinian Marathon athlete whose goal is to feed his family and who cannot afford the needed supplements for this training. The portrayals of the roles and interaction of those participants are within a limited circle. Another highlight is the use of pronouns, which as discussed earlier, either individualizes the Palestinian participants or puts them in ‘marginal’ positions.

The textbooks are tailored to engage the refugee children in texts that recognize them as Palestinian refugees, yet, the texts including references to Palestine whether as a location, or a character is minimal, comprising 4.5% of the total texts in grades one to six English language textbooks. Additionally, the material process, which presents happenings and doings which are considered as the most familiar and cognitively accessible to this age group of the children, as we have shown, shows a circumscribed construction of the typical contexts in which these processes take place. This study has presented the notion of knowledge as constructed through language,

embedded within the education the Palestine refugee children are exposed to. This focus on how language constructs experience can be drawn on in future drafting of teaching materials for different collectives in a way which can be more sensitive to identity formation.

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