

The Application of Rich Feature Analysis in Composition Studies

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Abstract: This paper employs rich feature analysis, particularly focusing on Halliday's transitivity, to explore linguistic features in argumentative essays about whether celebrities are suitable role models for young people. The study investigates the connection between linguistic structures and meanings in varied contexts, aiming to enhance learners' academic writing competence. The analysis reveals the prevalence of relational and material processes, influenced by the formal context and genre requirements. Comparative examination of two texts highlights differences in structure, process types, and participant selection, indicating potential cultural influences. However, the study acknowledges a limitation for students with lower language proficiency and raises some suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Rich Feature Analysis, Relational Process, Material Process, Linguistic Features, Genre, Academic Writing

1. Introduction

The method for discourse analysis is involved in rich feature analysis, which has been adopted in the composition studies to help learners make the connection between linguistic structures and their different meanings in various contexts, and thus improve learners' writing competence in the academic setting. Through the analysis of linguistic features in a text or a set of texts, language learners can obtain ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings that language in the texts performs. Meanwhile, these meanings may vary based on the context of situation and the context of culture. With regard to Halliday's transitivity that focuses on the ideational meaning, the Participant, the Process type and the Circumstance will be

analyzed in the feature analysis. They may present similar linguistic features or structures, which appear in a certain type of genre to some extent.

In this study, some linguistic features, for example, the relational process and the material process, appear at a higher rate of frequency in two argumentative essays about whether or not celebrities are appropriate role model for young people. Similarly, the Participants in the analysis are selectively chosen because of the context of situation which is formal and academic. Furthermore, the study shows that language choices in a text depend on the social purpose of genre, which is to argue a viewpoint or to persuade someone to believe what the author expresses. This link between language choices and the purpose of genre is presented in the study. In addition, the significance of rich feature analysis is demonstrated through the comparison of two argumentative essays.

2. Literature Review

Barton defines discourse analysis as "a method for analyzing the way that specific features of language contribute to the interpretation of texts in their various contexts" and rich feature analysis as "those features that point to the relation between a text and its context" [1]. In the SFL, Halliday [2] describes three metafunctions of language, which are ideational, interpersonal and textual. His transitivity analysis is involved in the ideational metafunction in which experiential meanings and logical meanings are included. The experiential meaning is represented by the PROCESSES, the PARTICIPANTS and the CIRCUMSTANTIAL features. There are six types of PROCESSES, in which the relational process and material process are mentioned. The former one refers to the world of abstract relations, and the latter one means the actions and happenings in the outside world.

Meanwhile, Coffin et al. point out that the transitivity analysis “reveals how the world is represented” and “different choices in type of processes, participants, and circumstances create different ‘angles’ on the world” [2]. In addition, Moore [4] proves the importance of transitivity analysis in helping students improve their academic writing. Coffin et al. define genre in SFL as “the way in which we construct texts in similar and recognizable way according to our communicative goals and social purposes” [3]. Martin regards that genre “makes meanings by shaping register - by conditioning the way in which field, mode and tenor are recurrently mapped onto one another in a given culture” [5]. The social purpose of genre will affect the ideational meaning, interpersonal and textual meaning in a text.

3. Texts

Text A and Text B (in the Appendices) are chosen as comparative texts, which are written and argumentative essays. The argument is whether or not celebrities are appropriate role models for young people. The texts are selected for some reasons. Firstly, the generic stages are similar from the form of expression. The argument point, the argument for it, the argument against it and the author’s personal position are presented in the essays. Secondly, text A is more formal and academic, and the ideas are easily followed in the well-organized text. Compared with it, the author’s ideas in text B are not clear to some extent. Thirdly, with regard to process type, both essays use a large number of the relational process type to identify the qualities or attributes of a role model. Finally, there are differences on the sentence structures between two texts. Text B uses more embedded clauses and the clause of “to do something” as the Subject in the sentences. Meanwhile, there are twelve paragraphs in it, which makes the text loose in terms of the structure. These similarities and differences are considered as reasons to analyze these two comparative texts.

4. Analysis and interpretation

There are some similarities in the process types in text A and text B. Based on the transitivity analysis, six process types (Relational, Material, Mental, Verbal, Existential and Behavioural), appear in both texts. From **Table 1 and Table 2**, two process types

appear at a higher rate of frequency. They are relational process and material process, which are rich linguistic features in the texts. The two process types combined account for 74.1% (Relational, 43.1%; Material, 31%) in text A and 73.5% (Relational, 35.3%, Material, 38.2) in text B, which are similarly equal.

Table 1. Process Type Profile: Text A

Process type	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Relational	25	43.1
Material	18	31
Mental	7	12.1
Verbal	4	6.9
Existential	3	5.2
Behavioural	1	1.7
Total number of ranking clauses	58	100

Table 2. Process Type Profile: Text B

Process type	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Material	13	38.2
Relational	12	35.3
Existential	4	11.8
Mental	3	8.9
Verbal	1	2.9
Behavioural	1	2.9
Total number of ranking clauses	34	100

The reason may be related to the situation of context and the genre. The two texts require college students to write an academic essay, so the texts should be written in a formal way. Meanwhile, the requirement is to identify the qualities or attributes of a role model and traits of celebrities, so the usage of relational process is to describe the characteristics of a role model and celebrity and to give more details about them. In addition, the usage of the material process is to support the relationship between the linguistic features and the genre. The genre of these texts is an argumentative type and its social purpose is to persuade readers to support the author’s ideas and viewpoints. Therefore, there should be more examples or facts in the texts. According to SFL, the material process is about what is happening and who is doing something. This can make the facts or examples more reliable for readers. So the social purpose of argumentative genre is achieved by the usage of material process in the two texts.

There are some mental processes in the texts,

which account for 12.1% (Table 1) in text A and 8.9% (Table 2) in text B. According to the requirements of academic essays, the authors should not employ mental process directly to express their stance or viewpoints. However, the genre directs the authors to explain the

reasons why celebrities are not appropriate role model, and thus influence the experiential meaning in the texts. This is the reason why the authors employ mental process to be subjective to express their emotions to some extent.

Table 3. Mental process

Process type	Text A		Text B	
	Number occurrences	Percentage (%)	No occurrences	Percentage (%)
Mental: emotion	2	28.6	0	0
Mental: cognition	2	28.6	3	100
Mental: perception	3	42.8	0	0
Total number of mental process	7	100	3	100

Table 4. Linguistic Feature Analysis

They	love	the way [[their idols are acting]],
Senser	Process: mental: emotion	Phenomenon

Table 5. Linguistic Feature Analysis

Celebrities	are admired	(by) the public	more	as idols.
Phenomenon	Process: mental: emotion	Senser	Circ: manner: degree	Circ: role: guise

Table 6. Linguistic Feature Analysis

Personally,	I	do not think
Circ: angle	Senser	Process: mental: cognition

From Table 3, there are only two examples, which refer to the type of Process: mental: emotion in text A. The author wants to express his/her emotion by using the words like “love” (in Table 4) and “admire” (in Table 5) in a subjective way, but the usage of the Participant avoids the subjective expressions. The Senser is represented by others, like “they” and “the public”, not by the author himself/herself. This will not make the readers be affected by the author’s own emotions. Therefore, the mental

process conforms to the writing regularities of academic essays and the argumentative genre, which emphasizes on the objectiveness in the writing. Furthermore, it can be seen that there is no process type of Process: mental in Text B. This again supports the idea of objectiveness of the academic writing style. However, there is only one exception that the author expresses his own viewpoint by using “I” as senser (Table 6).

Table 7. Linguistic Feature Analysis

(as) those celebrities	make	mistakes	just as common people.
They	may suit	your style	very well,
Actor	Process: material	Goal	Circumstance

Table 8. Linguistic Feature Analysis

(just as) you	do.
Actor	Process: material

Table 9. Linguistic Feature Analysis

(that) we	can learn	from the successful experience of celebrities.
Actor	Process: material	Circ: location: place

Table 10. Linguistic Feature Analysis

We	live	in a world [obsessed with the cult of celebrities].
Actor	Process: material	Circ: location: place

With regard to the Participant in the material process, three different kinds of the Actor

appear in text A. The first one refers to others, like “those celebrities” and “they” in Table 7, who are the doer of the action. The author uses these pronouns to give examples about celebrities in an objective way. This is compatible with the argumentative genre that there should be more examples to support the author’s viewpoints. However, there are also other Actors, for example, “you” in Table 8 and “we” in Table 9. The former one reflects the author’s consideration of readers to convey the experiential meaning, and the latter one indicates the author’s own thoughts, which may reasonably appear in the argumentative essay. From this aspect of view, the selection

of the Participant also varies in a certain type of genre. In contrast, based on the analysis mentioned before, there is a “we” as the Actor in the material process at the first sentence of text B (Table 10). It is different from “we” in Table 9, although they are the same as the

Actor. The “we” in Table 9 is the author’s suggestion for readers, but “we” in Table 10 is the representation of the facts and makes the text less formal. So the experiential meanings are affected by the different kinds of the Actor.

Table 11. Linguistic Feature Analysis

It	's	hard	[[to make a clear-cut statement on [[whether celebrities can be deemed appropriate role models for youths]]]].
it	's	better	[[to peel away the glamour associated with celebrities //and to treat them as mortals who are subject to judgment and opinions based on their attitudes and deeds]].
Carr:	Pro: relational: attributive: intensive	Attribute	...: ier

When it comes to the structure of the two texts, text A is tighter than text B. From Table 1 and Table 2, it shows that the number of ranking clauses in text A is nearly two times as that in text B, with the number of 58 and 34, respectively. Similarly, text A is more formal than text B in terms of text structure. There are many embedded clauses and the form of “it is adj. + to do something” in the process type in text B, which present complex sentence structures. The examples are shown in Table 11. In most cases in the text B, “it... + to do something”, which functions as the Carrier in the relational process, may not present the experiential meaning directly or clearly. It could make readers confused about the meaning conveyed. In addition, there are twelve paragraphs in total, so the structure may be too loose for readers to follow the argument point of the text.

The reason about this may be related to the context of culture. According to the general structures of two texts, it is possible that text A is written by an experienced writer and text B is written by an inexperienced writer or a Chinese student. Inexperienced writers prefer to use complex sentence structures in order to make the essay more formal or academic, without paying much attention on the clarity of experiential meanings. This may happen in the Chinese context, because Chinese students are affected by the culture that formal writing seems to have complex sentence structures and vocabulary. The situation easily happens among inexperienced students. Therefore, the situation of culture will influence the choices of linguistic features in a text.

5. Conclusion

From the data analyzed earlier, the rich

features in a text present similar pattern, with material and relational processes appearing at a higher rate of frequency in the argumentative essays. The less usage of mental process reflects the context of academic discourse in which there is less mental assumption or subjective judgments on the argument. In addition, the number of the ranking clauses and embedded clauses present differences between experienced and inexperienced writers. Therefore, these features are employed not only to convey the author’s experiential meaning about celebrities who are not appropriate role models for young people, but also to be connected with the context of situation, genre and even the context of culture. The rich feature analysis could be useful for students to understand the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings from different types of texts. They, from the SFL perspective of view, may need to build up the relationship between form and function and find out their problems in writing. In addition, they can connect the linguistic features they discover from the texts with the context of situation and genre, and thus become familiar with how to write an essay for a social purpose. The analysis helps them realize that different meanings may vary in different contexts and cultures, and finally improve their writing competence. However, there is a limitation for students with lower-level language proficiency to do rich feature analysis and benefit from it, so teachers need to design some activities related to the analysis to adjust to their students’ proficiency. The research about how to design these activities to achieve the purpose of the rich feature analysis need to be further studied.

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Appendices

Text A

Celebrities are people who have excelled in their respective fields and became well-known in the society. Actors, athletes, singers, businessman and even politicians are all celebrities. As public characters, they have their admirers who like to look up to them as role models and imitate them from interests to styles. Personally, I do not think it is appropriate to worship celebrities blindly, as those celebrities make mistakes just as common people.

When someone is seen as a role model, he should possess a good character and can be set as an example for others to learn from. A role model is not necessarily a famous person. He can be a very ordinary person around us, but he must have some good virtues that inspire and affect people around him. It can be either experience of success or morality that people learn from him. A role model is not equal to an idol. An idol is someone who is very popular with people due to his excellence in certain area. People have idols because what they are interested in or what they are fond of is displayed on these characters. They love the way their idols are acting, and hence have the

desire to imitate idols. However, behaviors and characters people like and imitate are not necessarily equal to what people should learn from. They may suit your style very well, but they make mistakes just as you do. Celebrities are admired by the public more as idols. They have great achievements in certain areas, or they have their special ways of treating things, which have them worshiped by many people. However, their achievements in careers do not automatically make them role models. They are also ordinary people and liable to make mistakes, or even very bad decisions at some point of their life. For example, many athletes and singers, such as Maradona and Kurt Cobain, are involved in drugs and gangs. Many youngsters idolize athletes and pop singers, but apparently, they should not imitate these behaviors. Having an idol is of no harm, but we should look at them with our minds open and not imitate blindly. Many people do not recognize the difference between a role model and an idol. A role model is an exemplary figure to learn from, while an idol is a reflection of what people like. Some people may argue that we can learn from the successful experience of celebrities.

However, learning from a successful person does not guarantee another success of the learner. For example, there are many cases of success after dropping out of school, such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. People therefore interpret that schooling is useless to them. They argue that, ‘there are celebrities who dropped out of school and still became so successful, why should I finish my education?’ However, they did not see how these successful people were working so hard before they made their decisions, and how they seized opportunities to fulfill their dreams. Most people, especially youngsters, only imitate the superficial characters of celebrities, without looking into depth.

In conclusion, celebrities should not be blindly viewed as role models. They are as ordinary as us in most areas. Every individual has his special personality and there is possibility to succeed. Behind the achievements of those celebrities are the same core reasons for success: hardworking, seizing opportunities, and a bit of luck. Youngsters should not let the persona of those celebrities they admired overshadow their judgments. They should learn from the values behind the success of

celebrities, instead of their popularity.

Text B

We live in a world obsessed with the cult of celebrities. Just look around us - the examples are numerous and commonly found. From advertisements and product endorsements to the world of pop culture, the star power of famous personalities is harnessed to market films, music and fashion, and a host of other related or unrelated consumer products.

There is a certain hip factor, a sense of 'cool', associated with celebrities, that encourages their fans to emulate the way they talk, dress or conduct themselves in real life. Young people, in particular, are impressionable and can be easily swayed in their thoughts, interests and attitudes when it comes to aligning themselves with what their idols are inclined towards. It's hard to make a clear-cut statement on whether celebrities can be deemed appropriate role models for youths. In general, we read about the messed-up lives that celebrities lead, as gleaned from tabloids and gossip magazines, and tend to make the sweeping assumption that all celebrities are equally 'messed-up' in their personal lives. There is certainly sufficient evidence to support such a generalization - like the rise and fall of American actress and singer Lindsay Lohan, who struggles with rehab for drug and alcohol addiction, breaking of patrol conditions, drink driving and, more recently, theft. In the past, there are countless examples of badly-behaved celebrities who, aside from indulging in their wild partying ways, have on occasions strayed into the wrong side of law. Aside from Icelandic singer Bjork's assault of a photographer in an airport and the wrecking of a hotel room by Hollywood heartthrob Johnny Depp, one can definitely recall all kinds of bad-boy antics by Brit-rock band Oasis' Gallagher brothers. Offenses related to sex and drugs, on top of other disorderly behaviour, can just as easily be found in the realm of rock 'n' roll as in Hollywood and the private arena of professional sports the scandalous affair of golfer Tiger Woods being

one example. On the other hand, there are also celebrities who put their fame and fortune to good use - like promoting good causes, aiding worthy charities or helping the less advantage in their own backyard or around the world. Through their creative work whether positive onscreen roles or uplifting socially-conscious song lyrics, actors and musicians can also pass on important life-affirming messages to their fans to better the world we live in.

In my personal opinion, it's better to peel away the glamour associated with celebrities and to treat them as mortals who are subject to judgment and opinions based on their attitudes and deeds. Likewise, ordinary heroes whom we find in our midst can be celebrated for setting good examples for others to follow. Aside from demonstrating strong skills in a field that they excel in, role models should uphold moral values that they believe in and conduct themselves in an admirable way that exert positive impact and bring about necessary change in their community, society and beyond. It's hard to suggest in exact terms what should constitute the checklist of attributes for a role model. And it is not meaningful to evaluate which popular figures fit the shoes of role models and which ones do not. Some celebrities, like Princess Diana and Bono, may seem more fitting as role models for young people, than 'bad sheep' like Edison Chen and Mike Tyson. But ultimately, what is more important is to recognize that any role model, whether famous or not, is also human like the rest of us and susceptible to errors and lapses.

The challenge for young people today is in discerning right from wrong, and in seeing the good in people in the face of often-gloomy worldly affairs. 'Role model' is not a label that schools or governments can prescribe to individuals. It's about the personal connection that we feel to a fellow human being who possesses some of the traits that inspire us to be better. This light in some people shines far brighter than the glitter of fame.