

Transitivity Analysis of Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford Commencement Speech from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the use of transitivity processes in Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford commencement address, with the aim of examining both the types of processes employed and their functions in constructing meaning. Drawing on Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday, 1985, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), the analysis focuses on the transitivity system as a framework for uncovering how Jobs construes his experiences and conveys inspirational messages. The findings reveal that Jobs dominantly used the material process (52.28%) to recount actions, achievements, and life events that emphasize agency and resilience. Relational processes (30.88%) were frequently employed to present universal truths and philosophical reflections, transforming personal stories into collective lessons. Mental processes (10.53%) revealed Jobs' feelings, hopes, and reflections, which helped build emotional connection with the audience. The verbal process (3.16%) framed his speech as dialogue and guidance, while the behavioral process (1.75%) highlighted visible reflections. Finally, the existential process (1.40%) emphasized the urgency of life choices. Overall, this study demonstrates how Jobs' strategic use of transitivity resources enabled him to balance narrative, reflection, and persuasion, making his address one of the most memorable commencement speeches of the 21st century.

KEYWORDS: Systemic Functional Grammar, transitivity, Steve Jobs, commencement speech, meaning construction

1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in how people construct meaning, share experiences, and influence others. One influential framework for examining language in context is Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), developed by Halliday (1985, 1994) and further refined by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). Rather than treating language as a set of prescriptive rules, SFG conceptualizes it as a resource for making meaning in context. Within this framework, the transitivity system offers a powerful analytical tool, as it explains how experience is encoded in language through six process types: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural, and existential. Each type captures a different dimension of human experience, ranging from actions and events to states, thoughts, feelings, and expressions.

Public speeches, especially those delivered on ceremonial occasions, provide fertile ground for transitivity analysis. Such speeches are carefully crafted to inspire, persuade, and connect with audiences. Commencement addresses in particular blend personal narrative with universal advice, making them ideal texts for exploring how language constructs meaning and motivates listeners.

This study focuses on Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford University commencement address, a speech that has achieved iconic status for its rhetorical simplicity and enduring motivational impact. It aims to examine how Jobs employs transitivity processes to construct meaning in his speech and to reveal how he utilizes these processes to construct meanings in his speech. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how systemic functional analysis can illuminate the meaning-making strategies of motivational discourses.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Systemic Functional Grammar

Systemic Functional Grammar views language not as a set of prescriptive rules but as a resource for making meaning in context (Halliday, 1985, 1994). It adopts a meaning-centered perspective, where communicative purposes and linguistic choices are central to analysis. A core concept in SFG is that of metafunctions, which, as Halliday (1994) and Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) explain, extend beyond clause-level features to represent meanings that operate throughout the whole language system. Halliday identifies three broad metafunctions of language: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual, each reflecting a distinct dimension of meaning-making.

2.2. Ideational metafunction

Ideational metafunction represents the idea that language serves for the expression of content; in other words, the speaker's background knowledge and experience, including his own awareness. The clause plays a central role as representation including the principles, which are made up of processes. Meanwhile the clause is also a mode of reflection achieved through the grammatical system namely transitivity referring to as a set of process types. The process types, in general, express the "goings-on, happening, doing, sensing, meaning, being and becoming" (Halliday, 1994). The transitivity system is concerned with six process types: material, mental, relational, behavioural, verbal and existential. The framework of a process involves three main components: (1) The process itself: realized typically by verbal groups; (2) Participants in the process: realized typically by nominal groups; (3) Circumstances associated with the process: realized typically by adverbial group or prepositional phrase. The concepts of process, participants and circumstances are semantic categories, which provide the linguistic structure of the events in reality.

2.3. Process types

In the current framework of SFG (Halliday, 1985, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), six fundamental process types are identified: material, behavioral, mental, verbal, relational, and existential. Each process type contributes to the construction of meaning in English grammar and is associated with particular participants.

Material processes represent actions or events in which an entity does something, often affecting another entity. The participant responsible for the action is called the *Actor*, while the entity affected is the *Goal*. Both Actor and Goal can be human or inanimate. For example, in *The lion caught the tourist*, "the lion" is the Actor and "the tourist" the Goal. Material processes may also represent abstract doings, as in *The mayor resigned*. When more than two participants are involved, the one benefiting from the process is the *Recipient*, as in *Tom gave me some flowers*, where "me" functions as Recipient.

Mental processes capture experiences of sensing, such as feeling, thinking, and perceiving. The conscious participant is the *Senser*, while what is sensed is the *Phenomenon*. These processes can be further divided into perception (*Tim could hear the speaker*), affection (*I don't like it*), cognition (*The students understood the problem*), and desire (*Kate wants a well-paid job*).

Verbal processes are processes of saying, involving symbolic exchanges of meaning. The central participant is the *Sayer*, but there may also be a *Receiver* (the one addressed), *Verbiage* (the content of speech), or *Target* (the entity affected by the saying). For example, in *He told me the truth*, "he" is the Sayer, "me" the Receiver, and "the truth" the Verbiage. Verbal processes may also involve quoting or reporting, as in *She said: "I'm tired"* or *She said that she would go away*.

Relational processes express being and relationships, typically realized as intensive, circumstantial, or possessive. These processes occur in either *attributive* or *identifying* modes. In the attributive mode, the participant is the *Carrier* and the quality assigned is the *Attribute*, as in *Your story sounds completely nonsense*. In the identifying mode, the distinction lies between the *Identified* and the *Identifier*, or between *Token* and *Value*, as in *Tom is the leader*. Possessive relations can also be expressed through *Possessor* and *Possessed*, as in *Peter has a piano*.

Behavioral processes represent physiological and psychological behaviors such as breathing, smiling, or dreaming. The participant involved is the *Behaver*, always a conscious being. For instance, in *She cried in silence*, "she" is the Behaver.

Existential processes indicate that something exists or occurs. These processes are often realized with "there" as a grammatical subject and verbs such as *be*, *exist*, *remain*, *arise*, or *occur*. The entity or event whose existence is affirmed is called the *Existent*. For example, *There is a storm* or *There is someone outside*.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research questions

To guide the analysis, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What transitivity processes are employed in Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford Commencement Address?
- How does he use those transitivity resources to construct meanings in his speech?

3.2. Data collection

The data for this study is the full transcript of Steve Jobs' Stanford Commencement Address, delivered on June 12, 2005. The transcript was retrieved from the official Stanford University website to ensure accuracy and reliability at the link: <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2005/06/youve-got-find-love-jobs-says>

3.3. Analytical procedure

The analytical procedure involved three stages as below:

(1) Identification of Processes: The speech was first segmented into clauses. Each clause was then analyzed to determine the type of process: material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral, or existential. Each clause was coded for its transitivity process type based on Halliday & Matthiessen's (2014) criteria.

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- (2) Quantitative distribution: Frequencies and percentages of process types were calculated to show the overall distribution.
- (3) Interpretive analysis: Beyond frequency counts, the study examined how Jobs used these processes to construct meanings.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis of Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford Commencement Address revealed the distribution of transitivity process types as summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of transitivity process type in Steve Jobs' speech

Transitivity process type	Frequency	Percentage
Material	149	52.28 %
Relational	88	30.88 %
Mental	30	10.53 %
Verbal	9	3.16 %
Behavioural	5	1.75 %
Existential	4	1.4 %
Total	285	100 %

Steve Jobs' speech consists of 285 clauses. The analysis shows that the material process dominates the data, accounting for 52.3% (149 times). The second most frequent type is the relational process, which appears 88 times (30.9%). The mental process occurs 30 times, comprising 10.5% of the data. In addition, the verbal process is found in 9 instances (3.2%), while the behavioural and existential processes are relatively rare, with only 5 (1.8%) and 4 (1.4%) occurrences, respectively.

According to Halliday (1994) and Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), material, mental, and relational processes form the core of the English transitivity system. A similar trend is observed in Jobs' address, where these three processes are the most prominent. This pattern suggests that Jobs' speech is largely concerned with doing and achieving (material), being and identifying (relational), and thinking and feeling (mental). These processes collectively highlight the way he constructs meaning to inspire the audience by emphasizing his actions and achievements, his identity and experiences, and his reflections on life and death.

5. DISCUSSION

Material processes

Among the six major process types, the material process occurs most frequently in Steve Jobs' Stanford Commencement Address, with 149 instances accounting for 52.28% of all clauses. Material processes encode actions, events, and tangible changes in the world, which makes them the clauses of "doing and happening" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). By employing such clauses, Jobs places emphasis on actors and their actions, thereby construing life as a dynamic sequence of changes brought about by human agency. This pattern is consistent with the nature of his speech, which is structured around three personal stories: dropping out of college, being fired from Apple, and confronting death. Each story unfolds through a chain of actions including dropping out, attending classes informally, starting companies, creating products, being diagnosed, and overcoming challenges. Some of the material processes in the speech are described in the clauses below:

- (1) *I dropped out of Reed College after the first 6 months.*
- (2) *We had just released our finest creation – the Macintosh.*
- (3) *I started a company named NeXT, another company named Pixar.*
- (4) *I returned to Apple.*
- (5) *I've been facing death.*

In these examples, the *actors* are predominantly Jobs himself, narrating his own journey. By presenting himself as the main actor, Jobs frames his life as one of personal agency, choice, and resilience. The dominance of material processes also suggests that Jobs conceptualizes life not as a passive unfolding of circumstances, but as a series of decisive actions.

From a functional perspective, this preference aligns with the motivational purpose of the address. By emphasizing material processes, Jobs encourages graduates to view success as the product of deliberate action. Zhao and Li (2018) observe that material clauses, by representing actual events, make discourse more objective and persuasive. In Jobs' case, action verbs also reinforce the broader metaphorical framing of life as a journey of steps, risks, and transformations. Thus, through the predominance of material clauses, Jobs motivates his audience to embrace agency, persistence, and purposeful action in shaping their futures.

Relational processes

According to Table 1, the relational process occurs 88 times (30.88%), making it the second-largest group after the material process. Relational clauses encode *being*, *having*, or *identifying* and are concerned with characterizing or defining participants

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(Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In Jobs' speech, relational processes are used to articulate universal truths, values, and principles, transforming personal experience into broader lessons for the graduates. The relational processes in Jobs' speech include:

- (1) *Your time **is** limited.*
- (2) *The only way to do great work **is** to love what you do.*
- (3) *Death **is** very likely the single best invention of life.*
- (4) *And yet death **is** the destination we all share*
- (5) *Remembering that I'll be dead soon **is** the most important tool*
- (6) *Remember that you are going to die **is** the best way*

According to Downing and Locke (2006), relational processes show how a participant is characterized or identified. In Jobs' speech, relational clauses are used to formulate universal truths or principles. For example, in (1) and (2), the concepts of "time" and "work" are characterized by qualities ("limited," "to love what you do"), which function as advice for the graduates. Jobs also identifies death as an "invention," reframing it not as a fearsome end but as a driving force for renewal. This shows that relational processes help him generalize from his own life to broader lessons for humanity. Similar to the material process, the relational process also offers a sense of objectivity by presenting truths as statements of fact rather than personal opinions.

In addition, Jobs' speech contains numerous examples that illustrate how he constructs experiences and identities. Relational clauses attribute qualities or states to people, events, and experiences, highlighting both positive and negative aspects of his journey. For example, "It **was** one of the best decisions" and "It **wasn't** all romantic" describe the nature of his experiences, while "I **was** lucky" and "I **was** a very public failure" define his personal states. Clauses such as "I **have** a wonderful family together" "I **am** fine now" emphasize successful outcomes achieved through persistence and resilience. Furthermore, relational clauses mark turning points and critical reflections. Examples like "We **had** a falling out," "I **was** out," and "It **was** awful-tasting medicine" frame challenges as significant moments in his narrative.

Mental Processes

Mental processes (30 times, 10.53%) form the third-largest group in Jobs' speech, representing clauses of sensing - thinking, knowing, perceiving, and feeling. While material clauses focus on external actions and relational clauses on states and identities, mental clauses reveal the inner dimension of experience. Their lower frequency compared to material and relational processes is unsurprising, given the speech's focus on action and identity. Yet when they occur, mental processes are strategically placed to convey reflection and emotion, thereby adding depth and intimacy to the narrative.

Examples from the speech include: "I still loved what I did," "I know," "I hope it's the closest I get for a few more decades," and "I have always wished that for myself." Through these clauses, Jobs reveals not only what happened to him but also how he perceived, felt, and reflected on those experiences. His repeated emphasis that he still "loved" his work, even after being dismissed from Apple, underscores passion as a sustaining force. Meanwhile, verbs like "know," "hope," and "wish" point to his ongoing processes of reflection, desire, and aspiration, highlighting the inner growth that accompanied his outward achievements. Such clauses personalize the speech, allowing the audience to see Jobs not only as a successful innovator but also as someone who experienced vulnerability, resilience, and hope. This interplay of inner experience and external action resonates with Halliday's (1994) view that language represents both the outer world and the inner world of consciousness. Mental processes thus humanize the narrative, balancing Jobs' descriptions of material achievements with reflections that appeal to the graduates' emotions and aspirations.

Verbal Processes

Furthermore, Table 1 shows that there are 9 verbal processes, accounting for 3.16% of the total. Verbal clauses represent acts of saying. Some of the verbal clauses in the data include:

- (1) I... **asked** myself: *'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?'*
- (2) Having lived through it, I can now **say** this to you with a bit more certainty than when death was a useful but purely intellectual concept: *No one wants to die.*

In these examples, Jobs uses verbal processes to turn private reflection into public guidance. The first shows self-questioning as a tool for decision-making, while the second transforms personal experience into shared truth. Though infrequent, such clauses strategically bridge inner thought with collective wisdom, enhancing the speech's persuasive power.

Behavioural processes

Table 1 shows that there are 5 behavioural processes, accounting for 1.75% of the total clauses. Behavioural clauses are often considered a bridge between mental and material processes because they encode visible or observable expressions of inner experiences. One notable example from the speech is: "you can't connect the dots **looking** forward; you can only connect them **looking** backwards." Here, the act of "looking" signifies perception - an outward act that represents a deeper process of reflection and understanding.

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Although not as frequent as material or relational clauses, these behavioural processes serve a significant rhetorical purpose. They emphasize that insight does not come immediately but emerges gradually through the act of experiencing and later reflecting. By using expressions like “*looking forward*” and “*looking backwards*,” Jobs metaphorically situates perception as central to meaning-making in life. This highlights a key theme of his address - the importance of trust, and patience in recognizing how life events interconnect.

Existential processes

The least frequent are the existential processes, with only 4 instances (1.4%). Existential clauses present existence or presence, often using the construction “there is/are.” In Jobs' speech, they are strategically used to highlight life's urgency and possibilities, as in “*There is no reason not to follow your heart*”. This existential statement is simple but powerful, which is they strip away complexity and reduce life's choices to stark alternatives. By doing so, Jobs reinforces the motivational core of his message, urging graduates to take risks and embrace opportunities without hesitation.

Taken together, the distribution of transitivity processes reflects the communicative goals of the commencement address. The predominance of material processes frames life as action, effort, and resilience. The significant presence of relational processes allows Jobs to interpret those actions as lessons and universal truths. The mental processes add emotional and cognitive depth, making the narrative more personal and authentic. Less frequent but still significant, verbal, behavioural, and existential processes expand the speech by including other voices, marking personal observations, and underscoring life's urgency. By deploying this spectrum of processes, Jobs constructs a speech that is simultaneously narrative, reflective, and motivational. The ideational meanings encoded in the transitivity choices mirror the purpose of the address, which is to share personal experience and to inspire graduates to pursue their own paths with courage and conviction.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford commencement speech through the lens of Systemic functional grammar, with emphasis on the transitivity system. The analysis of process types including material, relational, mental, verbal, behavioral, and existential has shown how Jobs' linguistic choices construct meaning and strengthen his persuasive appeal.

The findings reveal that material processes dominate the text with 149 instances (52.28%), highlighting Jobs' focus on action and achievement. The material clauses emphasize decisive life events and position Jobs as a man of action, which reinforces the motivational message that life must be actively shaped. Relational processes with 88 instances (30.88%) complement this by expressing general truths, which turn personal experiences into universal lessons. Together, material and relational processes balance action with reflection, which encourages graduates to pursue their passions while acknowledging deeper existential realities. Additionally, mental processes, occurring 30 times (10.53%), bring in Jobs' introspection, allowing the audience to connect with his personal struggles and realizations. These highlight the emotional and cognitive dimension behind his choices, humanizing him and building empathy. Verbal processes at 9 instances (3.16%) help guiding listeners through stories. Meanwhile, behavioral (1.75%) and existential processes (1.40%), though less frequent, reinforce the human and universal aspects of his message by stressing lived experience and the inevitability of life's choices.

Overall, the application of transitivity analysis to Jobs' speech reveals how language functions as a resource for both reflection and action, simultaneously shaping individual identity and collective values. This study affirms the usefulness of SFG in uncovering the relationship between grammar, and persuasion in public discourse. For researchers and educators alike, such an approach not only deepens their understanding of iconic speeches but also provides a framework for examining how everyday language choices shape meaning in broader social and cultural contexts.

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