

LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF PROCESSES IN TEACHER –STUDENT CONVERSATIONS IN THE MEMOIR *TEACHER MAN* BY FRANK MCCOURT IN LIGHT OF FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR

ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGÔN NGỮ HỌC CỦA CÁC DIỄN TRÌNH TRONG CÁC HỘI THOẠI GIỮA GIÁO VIÊN VÀ SINH VIÊN TRONG TỰ TRUYỆN *NGƯỜI THẦY* CỦA NHÀ VĂN FRANK MCCOURT

Nguyen Thi Ngoc Ly¹, Nguyen Thi Quynh Hoa²

¹Master Student Course 29 (2014-2016), English Language Major

²University of Foreign Language Studies, The University of Danang; quynhhoandng@gmail.com

Abstract - Halliday's Functional Grammar (FG) considers language as consisting of semantic units whereby there are six processes that represent human experience in terms of: physical and physiological actions, thinking and speaking actions, and actions that signal the existence of something/someone and their identifying features. These processes with their characteristics and functions have attracted much attention of many linguists and researchers. The typical function of the process is to represent the activities in a clause. This article is an attempt to identify and analyze the processes used in teacher-student conversations (TSCs) in the memoir *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt in terms of semantic and syntactic aspects. These findings can make students majoring in English understand more clearly about processes often employed in TSCs.

Key words - process; teacher-student conversations; syntax; semantics; function

1. Rationale

In the discussion about Functional Grammar (FG), Halliday (2004) explains that functional grammar looks at language as consisting of units of meanings rather than chunks of forms. Functional Grammar is one of the grammatical paradigms in the sense that everything in it can be explained. The term “functional” is used because it describes the chief principle of the approach to grammar, which sees grammatical categories in terms of their communicative function. Functional Grammar, as its name suggests, explains the ways a sentence functions by linking words that share a purpose.

Conversation is a form of communication; however, it is usually more spontaneous and less formal. We enter conversations for purposes of pleasant engagement in order to meet new people, to find out information and to enjoy social interactions.

Conversations between students and their teachers become extremely important for a successful relationship through the entire time of a school year. The conversations between the students and the teacher in *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt serve as a connection between the two, which provides a better atmosphere for the classroom environment. Of course, a teacher is not going to understand every problem of every student in his or her classroom, but will acquire enough information for those students who are struggling with specific tasks. The more the teacher connects or communicates with his or her students, the more likely they will be able to help students learn at a high level and accomplish quickly.

Tóm tắt - Ngữ pháp chức năng của Halliday cho rằng ngôn ngữ bao gồm các đơn vị ngữ nghĩa, theo đó, có sáu diễn trình biểu thị hành vật lý và sinh lý động của con người, các hành động nói năng và suy nghĩ, các hành động là dấu hiệu tồn tại của người/vật cùng với các đặc điểm nhận diện người/ vật đó. Đặc điểm và chức năng của các diễn trình này đã thu hút sự quan tâm của nhiều nhà ngôn ngữ và nghiên cứu. Chức năng đặc trưng của các diễn trình là miêu tả các hoạt động trong một mệnh đề. Bài viết này nhận diện và phân tích các diễn trình trong các cuộc hội thoại giữa giáo viên và học sinh trong tác phẩm tự truyện *Người Thầy* của Frank McCourt về các phương diện ngữ nghĩa và cú pháp. Các phát hiện của nghiên cứu này có thể góp phần làm cho các sinh viên chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh hiểu rõ hơn về các diễn trình thường gặp trong các cuộc hội thoại giữa giáo viên và học sinh.

Tóm tắt - diễn trình; các cuộc hội thoại giữa giáo viên và học sinh; cú pháp; ngữ nghĩa; chức năng

Teachers who communicate effectively with their students should give appropriate and helpful feedback to their students. The researcher realizes that the use of language in teacher – student conversations is one of the indispensable issues in the teaching field. Also the conversations between the students and the teacher contain a lot of linguistic features of processes from the perspective of Functional Grammar. Therefore, this research is conducted with a view to clarifying the linguistics features of processes used in the TSCs in the memoir *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt.

It is hoped that the research results make some minor contribution to present linguistic knowledge about the usage of processes in English conversations. Moreover, the findings on the linguistic features of processes of the teacher - student conversations analyzed in the study will probably be of some help for English learning and teaching.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Transitivity

Transitivity is a semantic concept that examines how meaning is represented in the clause. By definition, transitivity in SFG is a process-centered system to encode and decode the experience and knowledge of human beings via lexico grammar. It is Halliday (1967) who first stated that transitivity should be regarded as a property of clauses rather than verbs. Thompson (2000) has also explicated that transitivity is a system for describing the whole clause, rather than the verb and its object. The systems and networks of transitivity convey the user's experience of the

external world of the senses and the internal world of the mind. The term “process” of transitivity refers to the “goings-on” in reality, for example, doing, happening and being. According to the latest edition of Halliday’s [2008] *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, the transitivity system is composed of six processes that represent human experience in terms of: physical and physiological actions (Material and Behavioural), thinking and speaking actions (Mental and Verbal) and actions that signal the existence of something/someone and their identifying features (Existential and Relational).

According to Halliday [1985], there are three components in a process which explain in a general way phenomena of the real world represented as linguistic structures. These are processes, participants in a process, circumstances associated with a process.

The process is realized by a verbal group; the participant by a nominal group and the circumstance by an adverbial group or a prepositional phrase as illustrated by Halliday [4].

Table 1. Typical Functions of Group and Phrase Classes

Type of element	Typically realized by
Process	Verbal group
Participant	Nominal group
Circumstance	Adverbial group or Prepositional group

[4, p.102]

The following example clarifies this:

The lion chased the tourist lazily through the brush.

<i>The lion</i>	<i>Chased</i>	<i>the tourist</i>	<i>lazily</i>	<i>through the brush</i>
Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstance	Circumstance
Nominal group	Verbal Group	Nominal Group	Adverbial Group	Prepositional Phrase

[4, p.103]

In Halliday’s transitivity system, the **material process**, a process of doing, usually describes concrete and tangible actions. The process expresses the notion that a participant, the Actor, “does” something—which may be done “to” some other participants, the Goal.

The **mental process** accounts for the process of sensing and involves not material actions but phenomena best described as states of mind or psychological events. A mental process should have two participants, the Sensor (endowed with consciousness) and the Phenomenon (realized as a thing or as a fact).

The **relational process**, a process of being, serves to establish a relation between two separate entities. As the term “relational” suggests, something is being said to “be” something else in relational clauses. There are two types of relational processes: the attributive relational process with the Carrier and the Attribute as the participants, and the identifying relational process with the Identified and the Identifier as the participants.

The **behavioural process** is the process of typically human physiological and psychological behavior.

Normally, a behavioural process has only one participant: the human Behavior. Being partly like the material process and partly like the mental process, the behavioural process is the least distinct of all the six process types, especially in the language of science.

The **verbal process** is the process of saying. It characteristically involves three participants: the Sayer, the Receiver and the Verbiage. The Sayer, the participant responsible for the verbal process, is typically but not necessarily conscious. The Receiver is the participant to whom the saying is directed. The Verbiage is characterized by nouns expressing verbal behavior, such as *question*, *story* and *report*.

The **existential process** represents existence or happening through a process and a participant that is being said to exist, the Existent. Generally speaking, the existential process is realized by the There-construction in English which has no representational function and there are no human participants in existential processes. The six processes categorized in Halliday’s approach to transitivity are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Process Types, Their Meanings and Characteristic Participants

Process Type	Category meaning	Participant, directly involved	Participant, obliquely involved
material: action event	‘doing’ ‘doing’ ‘happening’	Actor, Goal	Recipient, Client; Scope; Initiator; Attribute
behavioural	‘behaving’	Behavior	Inducer
mental: perception cognition desideration emotion	‘sensing’ ‘seeing’ ‘thinking’ ‘wanting’ ‘feeling’	Sensor Phenomenon	Inducer
verbal	‘saying’	Sayer, Target	Receiver; Verbiage
relational: attribution identification	‘being’ ‘attributing’ ‘identifying’	Carrier, Attribute Identified, Identifier; Token, Value	Attributor; Beneficiary Assigner
existential	‘existing’	Existent	

[4, p.311]

In addition, the study also makes use of **experiential structure of nominal group** by Halliday [2014] because process participants are identified by nominal group. As Halliday (1994)’s classification of the structure of the nominal group would be analyzed in the example below:

<i>Those</i>	<i>Two</i>	<i>Splendid</i>	<i>old</i>	<i>electric</i>	<i>trains</i>	<i>with pantographs</i>
Pre-modifier					Head Thing	Post-modifier

[5, p.383]

In the simplest kind, a nominal group may consist of only a Head. However, in this case provided, the noun does not stand alone; it also contains modification, which may precede the Head (as the pre-modifier) or follow the Head (as Post-modifier).

Theoretically, the structure of the nominal group might be illustrated as follows:

Deictic	Deictic 2	Numerative	Epithet	Classifier	Head (Thing)	Qualifier
Determiner	Adjective	Numeral	Adjective	Noun or Adjective	Noun	Relative Clause or Prepositional Phrase

[5, p.383]

2.2. Definition of Process

The term “process” is understood in its broad sense and its narrow sense. Firstly, in its broad sense, “process” is a clause that functions as the representation of activities. A process consists potentially of three components, namely the *process itself, participants in the process* and *circumstances with the process*.

Secondly, in its narrow sense, “process” is a verbal element. “Process” refers to semantic verb and anything that it expresses like event, relation, physical, mental or emotional state when sorted in the semantic system of the clause is classified into material, relational, mental, verbal, behavioural, and existential processes.

3. Research Methods

The descriptive method is used to describe, give more details, explanations and clarify characteristics of processes in terms of syntactic and semantic features in the TSCs.

Then the inductive method is mainly used to draw out conclusions on common linguistic features of processes in the TSCs.

In order to collect the data for the study’s analysis, the researcher has built up some criteria for choosing samples as follows:

The samples must be a clause that functions as the representation of activities and contain a verbal group.

The samples must be taken from the conversations between teacher and students in *Teacher Man*.

Processes in TSCs are based on Halliday’s classification [2008] which shows 6 types namely material process, mental process, relational process, behavioural process, verbal process, existential process.

With the above set criteria, 311 processes have been collected to build up the data. All these processes are available in the TSCs in the memoir *Teacher Man*.

4. Findings and Discussion

It can be realized from the analysis of the data collected from the memoir *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt under two topics: Topic A is conversations about teacher’s life and people in Ireland and Topic B is conversations about lesson content. There are 6 types of processes used in TSCs and they are namely verbal, mental, relational, behavioural, existential and material.

As can be seen from Table 3, while there exist six types processes in TSCs, just two of them account for the vast majority of the total amount. They are Verbal Processes with 119 making up 35,5%, Material Processes

with 63 instances making up 22,5%. These Verbal Processes and Material Processes are the important types of Processes in TSCs. It can be concluded that McCourt prefers to use them to tell the stories of his life.

Table 3. Frequency of Processes in TSCs in the Memoir *Teacher Man*

Processes	Topic A		Topic B		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Material Processes	29	21,7%	34	23,1%	63	22,5%
Mental Processes	24	17,4%	20	11,8%	44	14,3%
Relational Processes	18	13%	21	12,4%	39	12,7%
Behavioural Processes	12	8,7%	15	8,9%	27	8,8%
Verbal Processes	50	32,7%	69	37,9%	119	35,5%
Existential Processes	9	6,5%	10	5,9%	19	6,3%
Total	142	100%	169	100%	311	100%

The other type of conclusion is sometimes used with the purpose of persuading the audience to be interested in reading his stories during 33 years of teaching. Mental Processes are used quite frequently with 44 instances, accounting for 14,3%. The typical verbs of Mental Processes like think, see, feel, love, etc. which can be used to express feelings, emotions as well as thoughts of the teacher and the students in their conversations.

In addition, Relational Processes with 39 instances, make up 12,7%, Behavioural Processes with 27 instances, occupy 8,8% and Existential Processes with 19 instances, account for 6,3% in the total number which are employed in the TSCs. It is supposed that the semantic and syntactic features of these processes are found to be able to prove that the conversations between the teacher and the students are real. The typical verbs of Behavioural Processes, Existential Processes and Relational Processes like eat, sit, walk, etc. are used to describe their daily activities and describe the characters’ actions in their conversations.

4.1. Semantic Features of Processes in Teacher-Student Conversations in *Teacher Man* in the View of Functional Grammar

The conversations between McCourt and his students centred around two following topics: teacher’s life and people in Ireland, as well as conversations about lesson content.

4.1.1. Semantic Features of Material Processes in TSCs in the Memoir *Teacher Man*

In this study, based on the view of Halliday [2004], through the data analysis of processes in TSCs, the researcher found 3 subtypes of material processes in TSCs. They are *intransitive material process*, *material process with goal* and *material process with beneficiary*.

In the intransitive material process there is one participant, an Actor. Let us have a look at the following examples:

(1) *Student: (...) Aw, man. Mr.McCourt, you ever in the army? You fight in Korea? (...) [9, p.38]*

Table 4. Intransitive Material Process

4.2. Participant: Actor	4.3. Process	4.4. circumstance
4.5. You	4.6. fight	4.7. in Korea?

In structure configuration of material process with Goal there are two participants called Actor and Goal. Take the following conversations as material process with Goal.

(2) Student: (...) Hey, Mr. McCourt, did you ever do real work, not teaching, but, you know, real work?

Teacher: I told them, after college **I passed the exams** for the teacher's license (...) [9, p. 57]

Table 5. Material Processes with Goal

4.8. Participant: Actor	4.9. Process	4.10. Participant: Goal
4.11. I	4.12. <i>passed</i>	4.13. <i>the exams</i>

(3) Student: (...) How come **you give me the pass** just like that? How come? You wanna get rid of me, right? [9, p.96]

Table 6. Material Processes with Goal and Beneficiary

Actor	Process: Material	Beneficiary	Goal
You	<i>give</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>the pass</i>

The three participants in the above clauses are bold. The participant which benefits from the process *me* in (12) is called Beneficiary.

4.13.1. Semantic Features of Mental Processes in TSCs in the Memoir Teacher Man

The data shows that there is a lot of verbs used in the mental process and these verbs express the motions, the feelings and the thought in the conversations between the teacher and the students.

(4) Teacher: (...) Ben, **I feel** honored you told me about your family. (...) [9, p.193]

Table 7. Perception Mental Processes

Sensor	Process: Perception	Phenomenon
I	feel	<i>honored you told me about your family</i>

4.13.2. Semantic Features of Relational Processes in TSCs in the Memoir Teacher Man

In relational clause, Halliday defines that there are two principal process types: the *Attribute mode* and the *Identifying mode*. However, in the TSCs, the researcher found only the *Attribute mode*:

(5) Teacher: (...) OK, one little thing. When **I was a boy** in Limerick I never thought I'd grow up to be a teacher in New York. **We were poor**. (...) [9, p.67]

Table 8. Semantic Features of Intensive Processes

Carrier	Process: Intensive	Attribute
I	<i>was</i>	<i>a boy</i>
We	<i>were</i>	<i>poor</i>

4.13.3. Semantic Features of Behavioural Processes in TSCs in the memoir Teacher Man

The conversations between the teacher and the students in the memoir Teacher Man are very real. The data showed that these conversations contain a lot of

verbs which express physiological actions or need of people such as walk, go, sit, kiss, laugh, ...

(6) Teacher: Maria **walked** beside me. [9, p.152]

(7) Teacher: (...) the boy saw that the old man **was breathing** (...) [9, p.194]

Table 9. Semantic Features of Behavioural Processes

No.	Behavior	Process: Behavioural	phenomenon
(5)	Maria	<i>walked</i>	<i>beside me</i>
(6)	the old man	<i>was breathing</i>	

4.13.4. Semantic Features of Verbal Processes In TSCs in the memoir Teacher Man

In the 103 conversations between the teacher and the students in the memoir Teacher Man, the verbs like *Say, Tell, Talk* are commonly used. In their conversations, the teacher tells his students stories about his life and people in Ireland:

(8) Student: (...) Mr.McCourt, will **you tell me what happen in Ireland?**

Teacher: I will, Nancy (...) [31, p.131-132]

Table 10. Semantic Features of Verbal Processes with 'Tell'

Sayer	Process: Verbal	Receiver	Verbiage
you	<i>tell</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>what happen in Ireland?</i>

4.13.5. Semantic Features of Existential Processes in TSCs in the Memoir Teacher Man

Halliday states that on construing being as simple existence, *Existential Processes* have only participant known as the **Existent**. These process types are typically preceded by *there* and occur at the beginning of a text or where a text is moving into a phrase and the typical verb used is the "be" verb admittedly, this is the easiest of the lot.

(9) Teacher: (...) **There was** a fast little smile and I felt too embarrassed to smile back (...) [9, p.62]

(10) Teacher: (...) **There was** no sign of blood. The hook was deflected by the thick leather of his work boots, (...) [9, p.62]

(11) Teacher: (...) Excuse me, James, **there's** a lesson going on here.

Student: Oh, yeah, yeah (...) [9, p.147]

(12) Teacher: (...) So, **there is** nobody on my street ever gonna go to college. Whoops.

Student: What's the matter? (...) [9, p.194]

Table 11. Semantic Features of Existential Processes

No.		Process: existential	Existent	Circumstance
(9)	There	<i>was</i>	<i>a fast little smile</i>	
(10)	There	<i>was</i>	<i>no sign of blood</i>	
(11)	There	<i>'s</i>	<i>a lesson going</i>	<i>here</i>
(12)	There	<i>is</i>	<i>nobody</i>	<i>on my street</i>

4.14. Syntactic Features of Processes in Teacher-Student Conversations in Teacher Man in the View of Functional Grammar

4.14.1. Experiential Structure of the Nominal Group: the Thing

The data show that there is a variety of nominal

groups used in the participants of processes. However, the researcher has found the two types of nominal groups that appear frequently in processes in TSCs.

Table 12. Nominal Group in Terms of Thing and Qualifier

Noninal Groups	Occurrence	Rate %
Thing	625	92%
Qualifier	54	8%
Total	679	100

McCourt preferred using the nominal groups with thing in participants of processes. McCourt employed the majority of personal pronouns in the conversations about his life in Ireland to denote who are saying in the conversations.

(13) Student: (...) *The gun glared at me as if she hated me.* (...) [9, p.195]

(14) Student: (...) *How can you enjoy yourselves?* (...) [9, p.195]

(15) Student: (...) *They like it when you tell stories and sing.* (...) [9, p.131]

Table 13. Transitivity Analysis of Nominal Group

(13)	She	hated	me
(14)	You	enjoy	yourselves
(15)	They	like	it
No.	Sensor Nominal Group	Process: Affection	Phenomenon

Table 14. Nominal Group in Terms of Thing

(13)	She
(14)	You
(15)	They
No.	Thing

4.14.2. Experiential structure of the Nominal Group: the Qualifier

Not only participants of processes are recognized by nominal group in terms of *thing* but also nominal group in terms of **qualifier** is used in parallel to reinforce the clarification of the TSCs.

(16) Teacher: (...) *A gourmet is a person who appreciates good food and wine and the finer things in life* (...) [9, p.268]

Table 15. Transitivity Analysis of Nominal Group

A gourmet	is	a person who appreciates good food and wine and the finer things in life
Carrier	Process:	Attribute
Nominal group	possession	Nominal group

Table 16. Nominal Group in Terms of Qualifier

a	person	who appreciates good food and wine and the finer things in life
Deictic	Thing	Qualifier

Significantly, as shown in Table 11, the nominal

groups in terms of thing predominate in participants of processes. With 625 instances occupying 92,04% of the total, the nominal groups in terms of things are given the top priority in view of dignifying the nominal group in participants of processes. They are used to make the readers easily distinguish the characters in the TSCs. Moreover, the nominal groups in terms of qualifiers also play a significant role in participants of processes due to clarifying as much information as possible to the readers.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper is aimed at investigating processes employed in TSCs. The result from the analysis of 103 conversations shows that 311 processes used in TSCs in the memoir *Teacher Man*.

In terms of semantic features, the researcher found 6 types of processes namely material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural and existential. In TSCs in the memoir *Teacher Man*, McCourt mainly employed processes, especially verbal processes, which occupies over 35% to tell the stories about his life during over 30 years of teaching.

In terms of syntactic features, the processes in teacher-student conversations in the memoir *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt are recognized in the view of Functional Grammar. The nominal groups in terms of *thing* and *qualifier* are commonly used in processes of TSCs. The nominal groups in terms of *thing* outnumbers with 625 instances (92,04%) compared to 54 instances of nominal groups with *qualifier* (7,96%). These diversified nominal group types not only make the conversations clear but also enhance the characteristics of processes in TSCs.

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