

# Discourse Analysis of Sitcom Friends Based on Transitivity Theory

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## Abstract

Using the transitivity theory in Systemic functional linguistics, this paper makes a discourse analysis of the lines in the famous American Sitcom Friends, and examines the distribution of six process types in it. The author analyzes the process types used in this film and television work through examples, hoping to enable readers to understand the theme of the work from multiple perspectives, and fully demonstrate the importance of discourse in driving character relationships, inner activities, and storyline development.

## Keywords

Functional linguistics; Transitivity theory; *Friends*; Discourse analysis.

## 1. Introduction

*Friends* is a famous American Sitcom series co produced by David Crane and Marta Kaufman. The American drama has a total of ten seasons, with a duration spanning nearly 10 years. The plot tells the story of Monica, Chandler, Rachel, Phoebe, Joey, and Ross, three men and three women living under the same roof as each other's best *Friends*. They tell the story of their lives in New York from aspects such as love, work, *Friendship*, and personal growth. Each of the six characters has its own unique characteristics, and their personalities are vastly different. Although life may be a mess, their *Friendship* has never changed. This drama has received unanimous praise from the audience and high ratings. It not only brings joy and laughter to the audience, but also affects their perception of ideal *Friendship* and love. (Kuang, 2023) The success of *Friends* has promoted the development of American Sitcom to some extent.

For the study of *Friends*, some scholars have studied the translation of euphemisms from the perspective of teleology, while others have conducted discourse analysis from the perspective of indirect speech acts; There are analyses of humor mechanisms from the perspective of framework transfer theory, as well as analyses of conversational implicatures that violate cooperative principles; There are studies analyzing verbal irony or pragmatic humor from the perspective of relevance theory, but there is a lack of specific analysis of discourse from the perspective of transitivity theory.

Secondly, most scholars use transitivity theory to conduct discourse analysis on novels, essays, etc. Few of them conduct discourse analysis on film and television dramas. In fact, discourse analysis on the lines of film and television dramas is more realistic. Linguistics provides a more objective perspective for film and television literature, and applies Systemic functional linguistics to discourse analysis, It can provide the audience with a deeper understanding of the screenwriter's lines and plot control. To further explore its thematic significance, the author starts from the perspective of transitivity theory of language and conducts discourse analysis on some character lines in *Friends*, revealing the role of six process types in specific application, thus reflecting the importance of discourse in promoting character relationships, inner activities, and story plot.

## 2. Transitivity Theory

### 2.1. A Brief Introduction to the Theory of Transitivity

Discourse analysis is an effective approach to linguistic research, and transitivity theory, as a popular tool for discourse analysis, can be widely applied in linguistic discourse analysis. It can also analyze various discourses such as fairy tales and dramas. (Zhang, 2017) The transitivity system is the cornerstone of expressing the speaker's subjective and objective experiences, as well as the cornerstone of reproducing language experiences. The transitivity system divides what people see, hear, and do in real life into several processes, explaining the relevant participants and environmental components in the process, and reflecting the various processes, states, and relationships that things in real life are in. (Zhou, 2017) The linguist Michael Halliday's functional grammar is used to analyze discourse. Michael Halliday's transitivity theory is widely used in discourse analysis, which takes clauses as the analysis unit to analyze the relationship between participants and processes. The transitivity structure is usually composed of three parts: process, participant, and environment, and process is the core of transitivity analysis. (Zhang, 2017)

The development of transitivity theory has roughly gone through two stages: the traditional Parsing and the transitivity theory of systemic functional grammar. Some traditional grammar defines the research object of the transitivity system as verbs, and some scholars distinguish between "transitive verbs" and "non transitive verbs" based on whether the verb can be followed by an object. However, this classification cannot explain all verb types. For example, some English verbs can be summarized into more than one verb type. In order to reduce the overlap of certain verb classifications, Michael Halliday, the founder of Systemic functional linguistics, put forward the concept of transitivity to the level of clauses. At the same time, Michael Halliday also believes that the transitivity system covers the whole clause, which covers the process, participants and environmental elements.

Systemic functional grammar divides language into three metafunctions: conceptual function, interpersonal function, and discourse function. Transitivity is used to reflect the conceptual function of functional grammar. Transitivity represents the process of things: what is happening, what is being done, feelings, states, etc. The process of transitivity is divided into six processes: material, psychological, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential. The material process is the process of making actions; Psychological process is the process of perceiving the world; The relational process is used to reflect the process between things; The speech process is a process of information transmission between psychological and behavioral processes, through which information is exchanged through speech; The behavioral process is the physiological and psychological behavioral action process of the actor; The process of existence is used to express the existence of things. It is not difficult to see that the transitivity theory provides a relatively objective analytical standard for text analysis. (Zhang, 2017)

### 2.2. The Development of Transitivity Theory at Home and Abroad

In the past half century, in order to improve the transitivity theory of Systemic functional linguistics, many foreign systemic functional grammarians have made efforts, including Matthiessen, Martin and Fawcett. In 1995, Matthiessen supplemented and expanded the transitivity system in the "Lexicogrammatical Cartography: English Systems" based on Halliday, and used cartography to present the transitivity system. In 2010, Martin, Matthiessen, and Painter co authored "Deploying Functional Grammar", which is a unique and cross referenced book with Halliday's "Introduction to Functional Grammar" second and third editions. Martin et al. divided the transitivity theory into five sections, namely orientation, survey of options, troubleshooting, analysis practice, review and contextualization. On the basis of Halliday's discourse on transitivity, Fawcett proposed different insights, which were continuously revised

and improved, and ultimately presented a complete network of transitivity systems in the book 'The Functional Semantics Handbook: Analyzing English at the Level of Meanings'. (He &Wei, 2016)

Since the 1980s, many domestic researchers have focused on the development and improvement of transitivity theory. So far, Hu Zhuanglin and others have provided a relatively comprehensive introduction to transitivity theory. An Introduction to Systemic functional linguistics by Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng, Zhang Delu and other scholars further revised Systemic functional linguistics. In the fourth chapter of this book, they introduced the six processes of transitivity and the participants involved in each process. This book provides important resources for domestic language scholars in the field of transitivity theory and lays an important foundation for the comprehensive development of transitivity theory research. In addition, Cheng Qilong's book "Introduction to Systemic Functional Grammar" also made a new attempt to study transitivity theory, with unique insights. In addition to the scholars and works mentioned above, there are also domestic scholars such as Xiao Junhong, Zhu Yongsheng, and Yan Shiqing who have explored, developed, and improved the theory of transitivity. (Zhou, 2017)

Functional linguistics believes that form and meaning are not one-to-one correspondences. Form is the embodiment of meaning, and one form can represent multiple meanings, and one meaning can also be reflected by multiple forms (Huang, 2003). Therefore, analyzing the relationship between the process and participants and studying the transitivity of sentences can better understand the meaning of sentences.

### 3. Discourse Analysis

This article analyzes the behavioral process using the 22nd episode of the first season and the third episode of the second season in *Friends* as examples, and the remaining five processes using the first and fifteenth episodes of the fourth season as examples.

#### 3.1. Material process reflected in the discourse

Generally speaking, a discourse will involve multiple transitive processes, and most of them are material processes. Because the material world is primary. The material process refers to the process of making actions, especially the process of the actions themselves, which is generally reflected by action verbs and represents the process of something. It requires the "verb author" and the "goal" of the action to be reflected by nouns or nominal words. (Zhang, 2017)

In the first and fifteenth episodes of the fourth season, there are a total of six occurrences of material processes. For example, in the sentence "So, I turned it off and checked every outlet.", I is the author of the action, turned off and checked are material processes, and it and every outlet are the targets of the action. This sentence was said by Monica. When she found a switch at Joey's entrance that she didn't know was in use, she turned it off and checked each socket, indicating her determination to find out the use of the switch. Later, she knocked holes in many parts of her home and hung many paintings to cover them up. She pretended to think that this made the living room more beautiful, and asked Rachel if she also felt the same way, highlighting Monica's guilt from the side. Through these two material processes, we can further see that Monica is a very obsessive-compulsive person, laying the groundwork for the subsequent portrayal of Monica as a stubborn and typical housewife.

In "one swift kick and he'll back off.", one is the author of the action, kick is the material process, and he is the target of the action. The background of the story here is that Ross is playing rugby with his girlfriend Emily's friend. During halftime, he feels like he is about to die. This exaggerated technique indicates that he is not a match for Emily's friend in playing rugby and is not good at high-intensity physical exercise. So Emily was telling Ross about the weaknesses

of her *Friends* and helping Ross defeat them on the field. Emily said that Devon's ankle was weak and he would fall with just one kick, which directly helped Ross win in the second half of the game. This material process has a strong visual effect, which indirectly reflects the fact that Devon's ankle is weak and Emily's heartache for Ross, further promoting the development of the plot.

In 'Anyway She didn't want to stay. I called a cab. She just left.', She and I are the movers, and didn't want to stay, called, left are the material processes. Ross still chose Rachel between his new girlfriend Bonnie and Rachel. He went to Bonnie's room to break up with her and had a conversation without knowing the time. It wasn't until a shadow appeared on Bonnie's head at 5 o'clock that Rachel persuaded Ross's new girlfriend Bonnie to shave her head. Rachel's unfriendly persuasion also showed that she was trying to manipulate the relationship between Ross and Bonnie, in order to make peace with Ross as usual. After discussing the breakup, Bonnie didn't want to stay there anymore, so Ross called a car to see Bonnie off, indirectly demonstrating his guilt towards Bonnie and her carefree demeanor.

### 3.2. Psychological processes reflected in the discourse

Psychological process is the process of perceiving the world, specifically including cognitive, emotional, and sensory processes, used to represent psychological activities such as "feeling," "reaction," and "cognition. Compared with material processes, the participants in psychological processes are not actors and targets, but "sensations" and "phenomena"; Sensators should be alive, and phenomena can be facts and objects. (Zhang, 2017)

In the first and fifteenth episodes of the fourth season, there are a total of 14 occurrences of psychological processes. For example, in 'I guess y' know I was born, and everyone started lying their asses off! ', I is the perceiver, guess is the psychological process, followed by the phenomenon of participation. When Phoebe's biological mother asked her if she wanted to know the causes and consequences, Phoebe said she probably understood that after she was born, everyone started to lie. This psychological process indicates that Phoebe does not believe that this woman is her biological mother. She feels that everyone is working together to lie. Phoebe, who has suffered setbacks in family relationships since childhood, has become less likely to trust others, reflecting her disillusioned indifference due to her lack of affection. This process drove the plot forward. Later, Phoebe's biological mother came to the bar to find Phoebe, and she took the initiative to find topics. The more they talked, the more they became more congenial, and they found that there were still many similarities between the two. This paved the way for Phoebe to propose going to dinner with her mother and forgive her regardless of past grievances.

In 'I need to know how you feel about this stuff.', I is the sensory, need to know is the psychological process, followed by the phenomenon of participation. Rachel wrote a letter to Ross, and before reuniting with Ross, Rachel wants to know Ross' views on this letter. A key point in this letter is that Rachel wants Ross to bear all the blame for their breakup. Due to Rachel writing 18 pages or both, it was still 5 o'clock in the morning when Ross overslept and didn't finish reading the letter. Therefore, he couldn't express his opinion on this letter, which laid the groundwork for Ross and Rachel to break up again in the future. This is about Rachel's psychological process, which reflects her emphasis on the relationship with Ross and her delicate thoughts. It also indirectly reflects Ross's carelessness and lack of attention. This is a typical way for both men and women to handle their emotions.

In 'Sometimes late at night I can still hear the dreaming.', I is the sensory, hear is the psychological process, and dreaming is a participating phenomenon. Chandler, Joey, and Monica were playing by the beach when Monica accidentally got stung by a jellyfish on her foot. At this moment, Joey remembered that he saw on the Discovery Channel that human urine can help reduce swelling and pain, so Joey kept shouting at Chandler, asking him to quickly urinate

on Monica's feet to detoxify, so that he couldn't urinate anymore, which became his shadow. He said he sometimes heard that cry in the middle of the night, Actually, that sound was deliberately made by Joey to scare him. This psychological process reflects the awkwardness of the situation at the time and Chandler's resentment towards it.

In "I think you're great. I think you're sweet and smart... and I love you." I am the sensory, think, and love are psychological processes, followed by phenomena of participation. This series of psychological processes all originated from Monica. She sat down with Chandler and had a face-to-face conversation, explaining her true feelings towards him and laying the groundwork for the subsequent plot of Chandler and Monica dating together.

### 3.3. Relationship Process reflected in the discourse

The relational process is used to reflect the process between things, referring to the mutual relationships between entities. The relational process can be divided into two categories: attribution and recognition. The former refers to 'a is an attribute of x', while the latter refers to 'a is the identity of x.'. These two categories can further be divided into three processes: inclusive, environmental, and all inclusive. (Zhang, 2017)

In the first and fifteenth episodes of the fourth season, the relationship process occurs 6 times. For example, the sentence 'I'm Red Ross!' is an implicit relationship process for identifying classes. When Joey and Phoebe both advised Ross not to play rugby again, Ross said this sentence, indicating that he was very bloodthirsty and had to continue playing with Emily's *Friends* no matter how tired or difficult it was. At the same time, this also echoes the previous text. Once, when they were queuing up to buy tickets for the movie "Dancing with the Wolf", someone cut in front of them. Ross got angry and shouted at him, his face turning red, so he claimed to have the nickname "Red faced Ross". This relationship process vividly portrays Ross's unstable emotions and his personality traits of shouting and shouting in times of trouble. The phrase 'There's a nuclear holocaust. I'm the last man on earth.' is also a process of identifying the implicit relationship of a class. Monica joked earlier that she wouldn't date people like Chandler, so Chandler has been holding onto this and pestering Monica to inquire about dating matters. The plot here is that he is assuming that if a nuclear explosion occurs and he is the only surviving man, he asks Monica if she would be willing to socialize with him. Chandler assumed himself to be the only surviving man and was eager to know Monica's views on him. This relationship process reflected his deep feelings for Monica.

### 3.4. Behavioral process reflected in the discourse

Behavioral processes refer to physiological processes such as laughter, crying, dreaming, breathing, sighing, coughing, sneezing, etc. One obvious difference in the process of behavior is that it only has one participant, the "actor". Therefore, it will be more difficult to construct the behavioral process into a discourse separately. (Li, 2014)

Therefore, the author analyzed a relationship process in the 22nd episode of the first season and the third episode of the second season, respectively. For example, the behavioral process of 'When she sneered, bats flew out of them.' is aimed at Chandler's ex girlfriend Joan. Because Joan's nostrils are too big, he said that bats fly out when she sneezes, and he also said that when she looks up, he can see her brain. This is undoubtedly an exaggeration, reflecting Chandler's disgust towards Joan. At the same time, this also fully embodies Chandler's humor and wit.

### 3.5. Speech process reflected in the discourse

The speech process was originally placed within the scope of psychological processes, but due to significant differences in transitivity characteristics, it has been singled out in the new model. It is a process of information transmission that lies between psychological and behavioral processes. Speech process refers to the process of people communicating through words. It



involves the most participants, such as "speakers", "listeners", and "speech content". (Zhang, 2017)

In the first and fifteenth episodes of the fourth season, there are a total of 7 occurrences of speech processes. For example, the conditional Adverbial clause "Oh my God! If you say that one more time, I'm gonna break up with you!" guided by *if* reflects the speech process. In Rachel's composite letter, it tells how Ross was unfaithful, but Ross insists that they were in a breakup state at the time, so having a one night stand with a stranger after getting drunk in a bar is not considered cheating or scumbag behavior. After listening to Ross's statement "We were on a break," even Chandler said that if Ross said that again, he would also break up with Ross. This indicates Chandler's position, highlighting his sincere and loyal attitude towards *Friendship*, as well as his kindness and warmth. This indirectly reflects Ross's identification with his desire for protection and self-worth, while also reflecting Rachel's responsibilities and obligations as a friend and partner.

The scratch in 'Joey kept scratching at me,' do it now, do it. Do it now! 'prompts Joey's speech process. After Monica was stung in the foot by a jellyfish, Joey kept shouting at Chandler, asking him to quickly urinate and detoxify, making the already awkward scene even more awkward, so that Chandler couldn't urinate. This indirect quotation has a vivid visual effect, vividly portraying the awkward situation of the three at the time in the audience's minds. This also portrays Joey's image of being simple, kind, and affectionate.

### 3.6. Existence process reflected in the discourse

The process of existence refers to the existence of something or someone. The process of existence only involves one participant, that is, the 'being'. The difference between it and the relational process is that the relational process deals with the attributes or identities of the carrier itself, which is fundamentally different from the process of existence. (Li, 2014)

In the first and fifteenth episodes of the fourth season, the existence process only occurs once. For example, 'Just some pictures I made and hung up.' is a typical process of existence. There are paintings by Monica hanging on the wall, which gives a feeling that there are already many paintings on the wall. In fact, it is a continuation of the previous text that Monica knocked holes in many parts of the house to find out what the switch at Joey's house is used for, in order to pull the wool over people's eyes. The painting reflects Monica's persistence.

## 4. Conclusion

As a well-known Sitcom in the United States, *Friends* has ten seasons, telling all kinds of interesting stories about the lives of the six heroes in New York. The plot is funny and easy, which is loved by everyone. This article takes the 22nd episode of the first season, the third episode of the second season, the first and fifteenth episodes of the fourth season of *Friends* as examples to analyze the six processes of transitivity theory. From the above analysis, it can be seen that Chandler's humor and wit, Joey's emphasis on emotions and righteousness, Phoebe's quirky spirit, Monica's typical image of a housewife, Rachel's delicacy in emotions, Ross's irritability and lack of responsibility. The author cleverly employs various forms of expression, with the most psychological processes appearing 14 times, indicating that the lines are mainly based on the protagonists' inner world and perception, which are the best representations of the true reflection of the characters' inner world; Secondly, there are speech processes, material processes, and relational processes. The author hopes to objectively narrate the story content in order to reveal the relationships between the characters. Although there are few behavioral and existential processes, they also play an important role in the development of the story plot. As the lines of the Sitcom *Friends*, it just shows that in the six processes of transitivity, the material process, the psychological process, the relational process and the verbal process are

more likely to become the carrier of humor than the other two processes. Moreover, according to the author's analysis, often a line contains not only one process, but also a combination of several processes, which undoubtedly doubles the humorous element. This study applies the transitivity theory of linguistics to analyze the film and television work "*Friends*". We know that it is a useful and effective analytical tool when used for sentence comprehension, and also deepens readers' understanding and grasp of the plot. (Li, 2014) From these processes, we can see the sincere emotions of the six of them, demonstrating the deep *Friendship* and love between the six protagonists, and reflecting the importance of words in promoting character relationships, inner activities, and story plot.

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