

Transitivity Processes in President Buhari's 'My Covenant With Nigerians'

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Abstract

Politics and politicking in Nigeria has assumed a considerably new dimension. Actors articulate their ideology and programmes, and construct their subjects and experiences in diverse linguistic processes with a view to achieving political victory. This paper examines clause structures of President Buhari's *My Covenant with Nigerians* to reveal the transitivity processes employed by the President in this famous campaign speech in 2015 presidential election. This study utilized *Transitivity Processes*, which is rooted in Halliday's (1985) *Systemic Functional Grammar*, in order to uncover different process types and main participants in the speech, and to explain the functions which these processes perform in the speech in helping the speaker to convey his ideology to Nigerians and convince them to rally support for him. Specifically, objective of this study is the uncover transitivity process types in the speech, their frequency, function and ideological underpinnings. The study reveals that President Muhammadu Buhari utilized mental and verbal processes perception, affection, cognition and volition, and verbal process of *saying* to appeal to the masses, and to commit himself to serve Nigerians. He equally used material and relational processes to encode his ideology, persuade the people and achieve political victory.

Keywords: campaign, covenant, transitivity processes, muhammadu bahari, Nigeria, politics

1. Background

Politics and politicking, not just in Nigeria or Africa alone, but the world over have awakened new interest in social commentators, philosophers, political analysts, language philosophers, and discourse analysts. These set of persons have to pragmatically engage the structures of political speeches in rigorous examinations in order to shed light on ideology behind the speeches. Politics, therefore, instead of only being defined by its prototypical participants (politicians), has acquired a wider scope for scrutiny such as its overall systems like democracy, dictatorship; special social macro actions, such as government, legislation, elections, or decision making; and their micro practices, interactions, or discourses such as parliamentary debates, canvassing, or demonstrations; its special social relations, such as those of institutional power; its special norms and values such as freedom, equality; and its political cognitions, such as political ideologies (Van Dijk, 2006).

Politics is a social field that is highly ideological and the ideology is couched in language. Language, therefore, becomes the raw material for politics to thrive. Ideas, experiences and desires are usually embedded in language. It is not surprising, however, that most of the intents of political actors and the underlying meaning of their speeches are not overt; they are hidden in the structures of their texts or speeches. It therefore becomes even more urgent to critically look at the structural patterns and clauses of the political texts and speeches to capture the ideology behind the texts or speeches. Ideologies in political discourse are often hidden, as history has revealed. This points to the fact that political process is essentially an ideological process, and political cognition often identifies with ideology which is conveyed through language (see Eatwell, 1999; Leach, 2002). In examining President Buhari's *My Covenant with Nigerians*, this study critically '...commits itself to revealing the hidden ideology and overt intentions of text producers as well as the relationship between language and power' (Agbo, Kadiri, & Ijem, 2018).

Fairclough (1995) views language as a social practice in which it is both socially shaped and socially constitutive. This implies that language use is constitutive of social identities, relations, and systems of knowledge. Whenever

language is seen as a social practice, it is an embodiment of power and ideology. Language is thus according to Fairclough ‘a site of, and stake in, struggles for power’ (1989). The totality of man has full expression in language. Without a proper understanding of the varied shades of meanings encapsulated and expressed in language, as the case has always been, man remains a pun in the hands of language users. Language is not necessarily ‘powerful on its own’ but ‘it gains power by the use powerful people make of it’ (Wodak, 2011). Language and power are interwoven and... ‘political speeches...influence the opinion of the audience through persuasion and maintain solidarity’ (Agbo et al; 2018: 96). Through political speeches, political leaders are able to influence the mental models, knowledge, opinion and the belief system of their audience. Essentially, political speeches perform both linguistic and political functions: they mirror the linguistic choices made by the speaker and serve the political purpose of communicating the ideology of the leaders (Amma et al., 2016).

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1 Transitivity

Halliday (1981) identified three types of meaning in grammatical structures. He calls them the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings’ (p. 42). Graham Lock (1996) also avers that functional approach to the study of grammar sees language as a system of communication and analyzes grammar to discover how it is organized in order to allow speakers and writers to make and exchange meaning (1). Functional grammar thus focuses on the appropriateness of a form for a particular communicative purpose and context. Functional grammar examines the functions of structures and their constituents as well as their meaning in context. Graham also aligns his research in grammar with Halliday. He also agrees with Halliday (1981) that there are three types of meaning within the scope of grammatical structures: experiential meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning (1996: 8). On one hand, experiential meaning deals with how language represents our experience; how we use language to talk about and to describe our feelings, actions, thoughts, experience, etc. Interpersonal meaning on the other hand has to do with how we relate with one another through language such as giving and requesting information, giving directives, offering to do things ourselves, and how we express our judgments and attitudes. It is language that we use to interact with other people, to establish and maintain relations with them, to influence their behaviour, to express our own viewpoint on things in the world, and to elicit or change theirs. Textual meaning on its own has to do with the ways in which a stretch of language is organized in relation to context; it enhances coherence in spoken and written text. Textual meaning enables us to organize our message in ways which indicate how they fit in with the other messages around them and with the wider context in which we are talking or writing. Essentially, in textual meaning, thematic structure is under investigation. The textual meaning deals with creating relevance between parts of what is being said and between the text and the context.

Man is in a world of experiences which may be physiological or mental. These experiences are described through language. Experiential meaning, that is, representing real life experiences (events and activities) in the linguistic system, is realized through the System of Process Types or Transitivity system. Transitivity explains what goes on in society (meaning) as against the traditional conception of transitivity to mean the grammatical feature, which indicates if a verb takes a direct object or not (Muhammad, 2011). To Halliday (1981), there are three components of a ‘transitivity process’, namely:

- a) *The process* itself,
- b) *Participants* in the process; and
- c) *Circumstances* associated with the process

When we examine the definition of a clause in connection with the transitivity system, Halliday (1981) noted that ‘A clause in English is the simultaneous realization of ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings’ (p. 42). He further added that it is also ‘the product of three simultaneous semantic processes. It is at one and the same time a representation of experience (ideational), an interactive exchange (interpersonal), and a message (textual)’ (Halliday, 1985). From the quotations above, we can conclude that a clause has a close relationship to the ideational (both of the function and the meaning), so that absolutely, a clause also can be related to the transitivity. The relation here is that we can analyze a clause by the transitivity system or what Halliday calls analyzing the meaning of clause as representation.

It is language which performs the function of expressing the experiential aspect of what goes on in society through the system of transitivity. The system of transitivity comprises different process types, participants and circumstances. In English, six process types are recognized: material process, behavior process, mental process, verbal process, relational process, and existential process (Halliday, 1985).

Material Processes are simply processes of *doing* or *action*. Material process verbs usually describe an action or

event. They shed light on an activity or event that happened. Material process verbs include catch, run, buy, jump, throw, build, scratch, cook, sit, do, hit, pay, etc. They mainly involve physical action. Material process clauses have two participants: the actor or doer and what he does or his roles (the goal).

Mental process is a kind of activity in people's mind. Mental process types include: 1). Perception –seeing, hearing, noticing, feeling, tasting, and smelling; 2). Affection – liking, loving, admiring, missing, fearing, hating; 3). Cognition - thinking, believing, knowing, doubting, remembering, forgetting; 4). Volition – wanting, needing, intending, desiring, hoping and wishing (Gram, 1996).

Typical Mental process clauses will have at least one participant representing the one who thinks, sees, etc. The participant is usually animate and human, e.g. I can do the work. When cases of personification are involved, the rule

above will not hold. E.g. My health knows I take care of it. This participant, that is, *My health*, is called the senser. Mental process clauses also have a second participant, that is, thing, idea or fact which is thought, seen, liked, wanted etc. (Gramham 1996: 105). Examples include: 1. Do you love me? 2. Most Nigerians understand English. 3. Here and there you see cars. This kind of participant is called the phenomenon. The phenomenon in mental process clauses can be expressed in a wide range of structures, e.g. 1. Lots of people like politics (Affection process phenomenon). 2. She thought that the best thing to do would be just to ignore him (Cognition phenomenon).

Another important thing about phenomenon is that phenomenon in perception process clauses is mostly a thing realized by a noun group, or an event realized by nonfinite V-ing or V-clause, e.g.

- 1) I don't get a chance to **notice** things very easily (thing).
- 2) I **saw** a crane lift him out of the pit (event).
- 3) I **noticed** Ngozi helping Jane with the answer (event).

A phenomenon can also be a fact, expressed by finite 'that clause', though the 'that' can be omitted in some clauses. E.g.

- 1) A police officer had **noticed** that he had a gun (fact).
- 2) He could **sense** all was not well with the man (fact).

A phenomenon in affection process is usually a thing, situation, or fact, e.g.

- 1) I **love** Chidi (thing).
- 2) I **like** them coming round here every Sunday (situation).
- 3) I **like** the fact that you have been convinced (fact).

In cognition process the phenomenon is mainly thing, fact or a thought, e.g.

- 1) We are now ready to **believe** the impossible (thing).
- 2) You have to **recognize** the fact that these things cannot go on forever (fact).
- 3) I **believe** you know what I am talking about (thought).
- 4) I **wondered** why you are here again (thought).

In volition process, the phenomenon can be a thing or a desire, e.g.

- 1) Do you **want** me? (thing).
- 2) I would **like** you to go home (desire).
- 3) I **wish** he had won the election (desire).

Clause, therefore, has a strong connection with transitivity. Halliday (1981) has noted that 'A clause in English is the simultaneous realization of ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings' (p. 42). He further explains that 'A clause is the product of three simultaneous semantic processes. It is at one and the same time a representation of experience (ideational), an interactive exchange (interpersonal), and a message (textual)' (Halliday, 1985). Since a clause has a strong link with transitivity going by the quotations above, we conclude that a clause can be analyzed through transitivity system in which case the meaning of clause becomes representational.

Verbal process is the process of saying and it is expressed by such verbs as saying, telling, speaking, replying, asking, suggesting and talking. Verbal process clauses usually have one participant, the 'sayer' (participant who speaks), the receiver or addressee (the one to whom the verbalization is addressed), and a representation of what

is said, the ‘saying’, or verbiage, that is, a name for the verbalization itself e.g.

- 1) I phoned to ask if we had got the answer (reported question).
- 2) ‘Be careful’, he warned (quoted directive).
- 3) Each person was requested to have a partner (reported directive).

There is another instance of verbal process, in which the ‘sayer’ acts verbally on another direct participant, with verbs such as: *insult, praise, slander, abuse, and flatter*. This other participant will be referred to as the target (Muhammad, 2011). For example:

The teacher	asked	him	his name.
Sayer	Process: verbal	Receiver	Verbiage

Example for Target:

I	Presented	you	to my friends
Sayer	Process: verbal	Target	Recipient

After retrieving the speech, we subjected the sentences to analysis according to Hallidayian Systemic Functional Grammar. We paid attention to the individual clauses which enabled us to identify the processes. The identification of the process types was done by isolating the process types into their separate categories. The processes were interpreted to arrive at the function and ideology behind the entire texts. We concentrated on the material, mental, verbal and relational processes in our analysis.

2.2 Literature Review

Political speeches have been severally analysed by researchers using speech act theory, critical discourse analysis. There is, however, little attention paid to political discourse from the transitivity model. Transitivity has proved to be a useful tool for an in-depth analysis of political speeches. Yichao Zhang (2017) carried out a transitivity analysis of Hillary Clinton’s and Donald Trump’s First Television Debate. The study sought to find out the distribution of the transitivity processes in the speeches, the similarities between the speeches and the functions they perform. The main findings show that material processes, relational process and mental processes are dominant in both candidates’ speeches and when compared with Hillary, Trump tends to use more existential processes. Yichao concludes that in political discourse, ‘speakers measure their words with special caution to interact with people, to expresses their attitudes and judgments, and to influence the viewpoints and behavior of the audience, which is mainly the realization of the interpersonal function’ (p. 66).

Amma Abrafi Adjei and Lawrence Ewusi-mensah (2016) applied transitivity in the analysis of kufour’s 2008 farewell speech to the Ghanaian parliament. The study reveals that among the six process types under the transitivity model, the material processes are used more in the speech whereas the existential processes are few, while behavioural process is lacking. The dominant use of material clauses suggest that Kufuor interprets the world in terms of his past and present experiences. He recounts some of the major achievements recorded in his tenure and further gives useful suggestions to the incoming government in order to ensure continuity in projects his administration has initiated.

In another study, Amma Abrafi Adjei Lawrence Ewusi-Mensah and Harriet Okoh (2015) conducted a research entitled ‘Transitivity in Political Discourse – A Study of the Major Process Types in the 2009 State-of-the-Nation Address in Ghana’. The study wants to investigate Mills manipulates language in his first State-of-the-Nation address to express his political message to his people. They analysed 536 clauses in the State-of-the-Nation address. The study reveals that language structures can produce certain meanings and ideologies which are not explicit for readers. This confirms the idea that language form is not fortuitous, but performs a communicative function. The study further discovered that among the major process types, material processes dominate the speech with a total occurrence of 59.14%, while the mental process types are used sparingly in the speech with a total occurrence of 14.37%. The implication of dominant use of material processes by Mills is that he and his

government are the major actors working for the people.

Laya Heidari Darani (2014) drawing on Halliday's transitivity framework attempts to reveal the persuasive style of the short story entitled 'Animal Farm' by George Orwell (1945) from a semantic-grammatical point of view. The study seeks how the persuasive style is realized through the process types of material, mental, verbal, existential, relational, and behavioral. The analysis shows that the material process is. The mental, verbal, existential, behavioral, and relational processes respectively followed the material process. The high frequency of the material process types reveals that the characters certainly did what they were told to.

In a study entitled *Transitivity and Context in Critical Discourse Analysis Case study: TAP headlines on regions in Tunisia*, Yagouta Beji (2016) analyzed the contribution of Transitivity to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in relation to the social and historical context in which it occurs. The study shows the representation of the discursive construction of Tunis Afrique Press (TAP) releases' headlines between January and March 2013. In the transitivity analysis of the news headlines, verbs denoting violence, demolition, criminalization and chaos are dominant. Violence represents 69% while 31% represents problem. A situation in which the study concludes that the government authorities were responsible for the violence in Tunisia during Ben Ali's governance (Tunisia president from November 7, 1987 to January 14, 2011).

Leanne Victoria Bartley (2017) investigated courtroom discourse. The study was entitled *TRANSITIVITY, no stone left unturned: Introducing flexibility and granularity into the framework for the analysis of courtroom discourse*. The findings after analysis of the closing arguments of the prosecution attorney showed a negative evaluation of the accused compared to that of the defence attorneys. The shifted focus to the defendant. The study further reveals that the prosecutor employed a number of references to *Affection process* in order to infer the emotions of the victim and conveys a negative portrayal of the accused and a positive one of the victim.

Other researchers who have also shown interest in transitivity analysis of texts include Mohd Muzhafar Idrus et al. (2014). They studied Transitivity and verb processes in Malaysian and Singaporean oral proceedings over Batu Puteh Island Issue. Juan Li (2011) examined the processes of ideological constructions within *The New York Times* and *China Daily* in their reports of an air collision between the USA and China in April 2001. We conclude from the review of literature that transitivity theory is very effective in the analysis of political texts. It focuses on the analysis of sentences according to Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar in which individual clauses receive attention. Transitivity theory thus enables the analyst to identify the process types, categorization of them into their groups, and to reveal the ideology behind the text. The review has equally showed that research on transitivity is lacking in Nigeria or if there is any existing research on transitivity, especially on political speech, we are oblivious of it. The present research is therefore both timely and important to fill in this yawning academic gap.

The speech under study here was retrieved from www.file:///C:/Users/HP/Documents/MUST%20READ_%20Buhari's%20Covenant%20With%20Nigerians%20%E2%96%B7%20NAIJ.COM.html

3. Results and Discussions

We begin here by identifying the various process types utilized by President Buhari in his *My Covenant with Nigerians*. Each of the process types is isolated in a clause, and the agents, process and goal critically examined in order to establish their functions and the ideology they carry. Thus we present a novel approach to the analysis of political discourse. The data under analysis is a campaign speech presented by President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 presidential election Nigeria. This speech formed the basis upon which Buhari was able to secure the mandate of Nigerians for the success of his presidential bid. This speech came at the heat of the political struggle between Buhari who was the presidential candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC) and the then incumbent President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, the presidential candidate of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). Buhari eventually won the presidential election in 2015. In our analysis below, we present the statistical table of the process types, their frequencies and discussions.

Table 1. Processes in Muhammadu Buhari's speech

Process Types	Material	Mental	Relational	Verbal	Total	Total
Number	45	14	11	18	88	77
Percentage	51.14	15.91	12.5	20.45	100	100

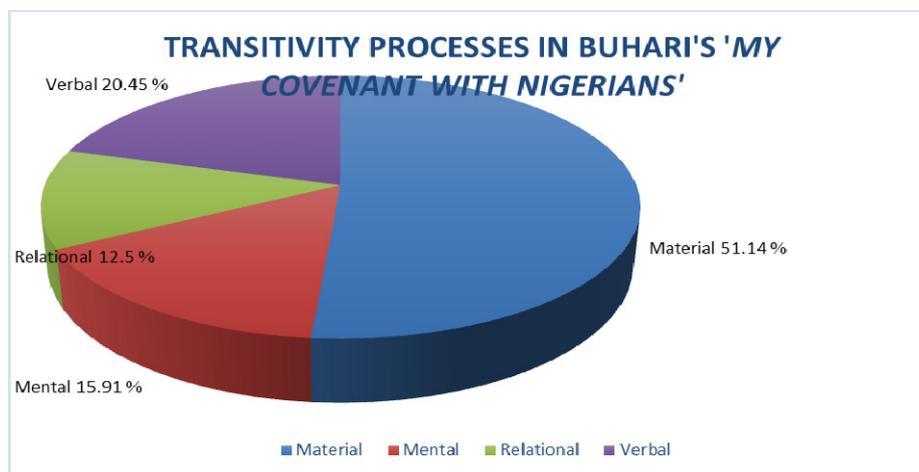


Figure 1. Transitivity Distribution in Buhari's 'My Covenant with Nigerians'

Looking at the above table, one can see that material process takes 51.14 per cent of the entire speech. Material process is the process of doing and it conveys action. In this analysis, it portrays the speaker as the active agent who has the overriding stake in ensuring the improvement of the wellbeing of the people. This commitment to the welfare of the people certainly gave the speaker an advantage over his opponent in the presidential race because at the time, change was the song on the lips of every Nigerian. There was a yearning desire for better socio-economic and political conditions in the country. For instance, in the excerpt below Buhari utilizes rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions have strong persuasive ability and can make the people agree to the opinion of the speaker. The opinion of the audience is not actually solicited. His use of rhetorical questions underlies an acknowledgement of the task before him if elected president. He however provides the answers to the questions. Providing answers to the questions has the capacity to affect the people positively. By implication, he knows what to do and has what it takes to do them.

*How do we **give** jobs to our youth? How do we **reform** our economy and make it work for every Nigerian?*

*This can only **happen** if we are able to **rebuild** the trust and belief that our people used to have in government, and indeed, in our nation. The leadership that I will **provide** will be built on this critical awareness.*

Verbal process is the next process type and the second highest frequency in the speech. It takes 20.45 per cent in the speech. Verbal process is the process of saying, and in this analysis, Buhari is the 'sayer', that is, the participant who does the saying, while Nigerians are the addressee and the issues about the wellbeing of the people which the speaker pledges to address are the saying. The verbal process captures Buhari as the chief actor or participant who wields influence on the addressee by offering to bring smile on the faces of Nigeria. The excerpt below captures the point that he intends to commit himself to promoting and protecting the rights, welfare and freedom of the people. He is therefore an agent of hope for the people if elected president of the country. His use of language is very apt and targeted at persuading the people for their votes. The speaker also intends to show that the law of the land has been subverted, hence he pledges to promote it. This is also an indirect indictment on the previous administrations as being autocratic. He intends to prove his capability as a leader. He is not only persuasive, but logical, hence he commits himself to providing the framework and masterplan to achieving his promise of securing the rights of the people as well as the welfare of the security agents and their families.

*I pledge to: – Lead a government founded on values that **promote** and **protect** fundamental human rights.*

*I will **promote** the supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law, **affirm** separation of the powers of government and support an independent judiciary.*

*I...present a detailed strategy for **protecting** the fundamental rights and freedoms provided for in our Constitution.*

*I...Give especial attention to the welfare of our armed forces and all other security personnel and their families, including State-guaranteed life insurance for all officers and men as well as **protect** the families of our fallen heroes.*

Mental process has 15.91 per cent and thus the third in rank of the transitivity processes examined in the speech. The mental process reveals the goings on in the mind of the speaker. The mental process called *sensing* helps to reveal the affection, perception and cognition of the speaker. In a country like Nigeria which is bedeviled by socio-political and economic problems, it was important for Buhari who was aspiring for the highest political office in the country to tell Nigerians what he feels, thinks, admires and wishes to do in order to address the problems. This will position him well to enjoy the people's support and it is illustrated in the excerpt below:

I perceived a longing for the days when honour, national pride and dignity of labour were the fundamental social principles that governed our country.

*Among them were many young men and women, who in the few minutes that I shared with them at the airport, made me to **reflect** on what kind of future awaits them in our country.*

*One of the biggest challenges facing Nigeria is building a country that is fair to all of its citizens; a country in which all individuals **feel** and **know** that they are valued members of society with constitutionally guaranteed rights; a country that respects human dignity, promotes human development, fosters human equality and advances human freedom.*

It is important for us to note that in discourse production, speakers generally start from their personal mental model of an event or situation. The mental model organizes the subjective beliefs, ideologies, and bias of the speaker about such a situation or event and in turn determines the action of the speaker. In the excerpts above, the speaker is the main participant (senser) and presents his belief about the desire of the people for a change of leadership and socio-political conditions in the country, the longing of the people (phenomenon). The perception of the longing made the speaker to reflect, that is, have a deep thought on the future of the people he wants to lead, as a solution provider. He thus constructs his experience to reflect his ideology.

The speaker then admits that Nigeria has a leadership problem bothering on inability to guarantee, promote and protect human rights. He portrays Nigeria as a country where right abuses and oppression are the order of the day. Nigerians do not feel at home in their home country. The speaker is thus sensitive to the plights of Nigerians and if elected president, his actions would be premised on his perception of the needs of the people as well as the challenges in the country.

The least used process in the speech is relational process with 12.5 per cent. Relational process in this analysis establishes the relationships which exist between the speaker and the people. It shows the interpersonal relationships, serves as a means of identification with Nigerians in their various challenges. Technically, the speaker is enabled by this process to close the gap between himself and the people whom he wants to lead. By establishing a common ground, the speaker has been able to dismantle the fear of alienation and reinforces unity, sameness and cordiality.

The gestures of 90-year-old Hajia Fadimatu Mai Talle Tara from Kebbi State and 9-years-old Nicole Eniiyi Benson from Lagos State, who donated *their life-savings to my campaign*, reflect the overwhelming desire of our people for change.

The speaker thus impresses on the mind of the people that he has been accepted by all. To further his goal of convincing the people that he is the only credible candidate for the office of the president, he informs his audience of a 90-year-old Hajia Fadimatu Mai Talle Tara and a 9-years-old Nicole Eniiyi Benson who sacrificed '*their life-savings to my campaign*'. This linguistic construction and its rhetoric force have the potency to influence the decision of the speaker's audience and to legitimize his ambition. It also implies that, if children, youths and aged persons have endorsed the speaker's candidature, he is believed to be the saviour of the people from socio-economic and political troubles in the country.

4. Conclusion

From the analyses above, we are more convinced that the transitivity system can effectively analyze clauses. In support of this claim, Bloor & Bloor, 1995: 107-109) have noted that 'Clause' rather than 'word' or 'sentence' is the unit of analysis in Systemic Functional Language (SFL). A Process and Participant analysis of text reveals the way language users manipulate language to represent their perceptions of reality.

The analyses show that the only one unit of analysis in the transitivity system is clause since transitivity system helps the users of language to express their experience, belief, perception and volition. In addition, analyzing clause by the transitivity system holds a great promise of revealing what language users do with language as evidenced here. In this case, President Buhari's use of language in his '*My Covenant with Nigeria*' captures the principles which govern his acts. It further reveals his persuasive ability to woo Nigerians to support his candidature in 2015 Presidential election as captured in the material, mental, verbal and relational processes of

his text. This reinforces Halliday (1985) assertion that ‘Transitivity specifies the different types of process that are recognized in the language, and the structures by which they are expressed (p. 101).

The analyses of the material, mental, verbal and relational process clauses reveal Buhari as the key actor. The analyses have enable us demystify the ideology behind the speaker by uncovering the relation between language and meaning. Transitivity theory therefore, is very helpful in discovering how speakers and writers encode their ideology, experiences and relationship with the wider society. Language performs communicative functions and influences man’s perception and interpretation of the world around him.

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