



Mapping Confucian Virtues through Transitivity: A Systemic Functional Grammar Approach to Moral Ideology in Discourse

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Language plays a central role in the construction and transmission of ideology through linguistic choices and discourse representation. Although Confucian ideology has been widely discussed from philosophical and cultural perspectives, limited attention has been paid to its linguistic realization through Systemic Functional Grammar. In particular, few studies have explored how Halliday's transitivity system may provide a framework for interpreting Confucian moral values in discourse. Rather than conducting an empirical analysis of a specific corpus, this paper explores the applicability of transitivity analysis within Systemic Functional Grammar as a conceptual and theoretical framework for interpreting Confucian moral ideology in discourse.

Materials and Methods: This study adopts a qualitative and theoretical approach based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, particularly the transitivity system. The paper conceptually examines the relationship between different transitivity process types and core Confucian concepts, including Ren (benevolence), Yi (righteousness), Li (ritual propriety), Xin (trustworthiness), and Zhi (moral knowledge). The discussion draws on representative concepts and illustrative examples derived from classical Confucian texts, particularly the Analects, together with relevant literature on Confucian ethics and discourse studies. Relevant theories of Confucian ethics and discourse analysis were reviewed and integrated to develop a theoretical interpretation of how moral values may be represented through linguistic processes.

Results: The study proposes a systematic conceptual correspondence between transitivity process types and Confucian moral values. Material processes reflect moral action and social responsibility associated with Yi (righteousness), mental processes represent cognition, reflection, and self-cultivation related to Zhi (moral wisdom), while relational processes construct ethical identity and moral evaluation connected with Ren (benevolence). These patterns suggest that Confucian ideology can be interpreted through experiential meanings realized in discourse and provide a theoretical basis for future linguistic investigations of moral discourse.

Conclusion: This paper contributes to discourse studies by establishing a theoretical connection between Confucian ethics and transitivity analysis. It proposes a conceptual framework for understanding how moral ideology may be constructed through language and suggests that transitivity analysis can serve as a useful analytical tool for future empirical research on moral discourse across sociocultural contexts. However, the study is conceptual in nature and does not involve empirical corpus analysis; therefore, the proposed framework requires further validation through future data-driven research.

Keywords: Confucian Ideology; Transitivity Analysis; Systemic Functional Grammar; Discourse Analysis; Confucian Ethics

Introduction

According to Halliday (1967), language primarily serves various purposes, one of the most fundamental being the expression of individuals' experiences of the external world as well as their inner thoughts and consciousness. Beyond communication, language also conveys and reproduces ideology by embedding particular values and worldviews within discourse. Language use is a process of meaning-making in which speakers continually make choices about how to express themselves (Verschueren, 2011). Language is, therefore, not only a medium of communication but also an important resource for the construction and transmission of ideology. This perspective emphasizes that ideology is not merely an abstract concept but is actively manifested, negotiated, and reproduced through discourse. Since discourse is inherently social and subjective, ideological meanings are often embedded within language. Recognizing this close relationship, critical linguists have sought to uncover the ideological meanings encoded in discourse (Xin, 2005).



Stubbs (1983) views discourse analysis as studying how language is organized in larger units such as conversations or written texts. In actuality, discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary field of study, despite the fact that it is frequently associated with linguistics. In essence, the focus is on how language, whether spoken or written, effectively communicates meaning to its audience. While Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is particularly useful for examining the relationship between language, power, and ideology, its primary concern lies in the socio-political interpretation of discourse. In contrast, Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) provides a more systematic linguistic framework for investigating how meanings are constructed through language choices. Since the present study focuses on the linguistic realization of Confucian moral ideology rather than issues of power relations or social inequality, SFG offers a more appropriate theoretical foundation. CDA is considered more effective for linking language use to power relations, ideology, and social context, allowing researchers to uncover the ways discourse can reproduce or challenge social inequalities. Its focus on social change and practical implications makes it particularly relevant for understanding real-world issues, which has contributed to its growing popularity. CDA focused more on the social interpretation of language rather than the linguistic features underlying these social phenomena. However, SFG offers a comprehensive framework that models language as a social context. SFG offers a functional approach to language, enabling researchers to examine how linguistic choices convey and reinforce ideological meanings. As a core component of the ideational metafunction in Systemic Functional Grammar, transitivity is concerned with how experience is represented linguistically through processes, participants, and circumstances. Transitivity provides a particularly effective analytical framework for examining how ideology is embedded and reproduced through discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Through its transitivity system, SFG enables a detailed examination of how experiential meanings and ideological values may be represented in discourse, making it particularly relevant for the present study. Since transitivity focuses on the representation of experience through language, it also provides a useful framework for exploring how culturally embedded moral values may be expressed and interpreted in discourse. This perspective is especially relevant to Confucianism, a philosophical tradition that has profoundly influenced Chinese ethical thought and social values. Examining Confucian virtues through the lens of transitivity, therefore, allows for a conceptual exploration of how moral ideology may be linguistically represented.

Within Confucian ethical philosophy, five core virtues are regarded as the foundation of moral cultivation and social harmony. Confucianism thus emphasizes the centrality of four fundamental virtues regarded as inherent in all human beings: benevolence (ren), righteousness (yi), ritual propriety (li), and moral wisdom (zhi). A fifth virtue, faith or trustworthiness (xin), was later incorporated, corresponding symbolically to the five elements in traditional Chinese cosmology—earth, wood, fire, metal, and water. This association further reflects the Confucian conviction that the moral order is closely interconnected with the natural and physical world (Van, 2020). By affirming that these virtues are universally shared, Confucian thought advances two significant implications. First, moral education is essential, as it serves to cultivate and develop these innate qualities. Second, all individuals are fundamentally equal in their moral potential, as captured in the Confucian ideal that “within the four seas, all people are brothers.” Through sustained self-cultivation and proper guidance, anyone is capable of attaining sagehood (sheng). What ultimately determines moral excellence is not innate ability, but the individual’s commitment to shaping one’s character in accordance with the highest ethical standards.

Although transitivity analysis has been widely applied to political discourse, media discourse, and literary studies, relatively limited attention has been paid to its potential for interpreting moral and philosophical ideologies. In particular, few studies have explored how transitivity may provide a framework for understanding the linguistic representation of Confucian moral values. This gap highlights the need for further theoretical investigation into the relationship between transitivity processes and Confucian ideology. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the applicability of transitivity analysis as a theoretical framework for interpreting Confucian moral ideology. Specifically, it examines how different transitivity process types



may conceptually correspond to core Confucian virtues and discusses how Systemic Functional Grammar can contribute to a deeper understanding of the linguistic construction of moral discourse.

Objectives

Based on the research gap identified above, this study seeks to explore the potential of transitivity analysis as a theoretical framework for interpreting Confucian moral ideology. The following objectives guide the study:

1. To examine the theoretical relationship between transitivity process types and the five core Confucian virtues—Ren, Yi, Li, Xin, and Zhi—from the perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar.
- 2 To develop a theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding how Confucian moral ideology may be linguistically represented through the transitivity system in discourse, while providing a foundation for future empirical investigation.

Literature review

Previous studies on Transitivity Analysis

Previous studies have demonstrated the usefulness of the transitivity system in revealing how linguistic choices reflect speakers' perspectives, values, and ideology. Although many studies have focused on political discourse, their findings provide valuable insights into the relationship between language and ideology, which is also relevant to the present study of Confucian moral thought.

Xiang (2022) applied Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) framework to conduct a transitivity analysis of Joseph R. Biden's inaugural address as the 46th President of the United States. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the research categorized the process types found in the speech—namely material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes—and examined how these linguistic choices reflected underlying ideological meanings. The analysis revealed that material and relational processes were the most frequently employed, highlighting Biden's focus on action, unity, and national reconstruction. Mental and verbal processes further demonstrated his attempts to connect emotionally with the audience and encourage a shared vision among citizens. The study illustrated how transitivity analysis can be used to uncover ideological meanings embedded in discourse.

Similarly, Kondowe (2014) applied Halliday's transitivity framework to examine Bingu Wa Mutharika's second inaugural address. The findings showed that material processes were dominant, followed by relational and verbal processes. Through these linguistic choices, the speaker constructed a particular representation of political leadership, achievement, and national development. The study further demonstrated the effectiveness of transitivity analysis in revealing how ideological meanings are encoded through grammatical structures.

Beyond political speeches, transitivity analysis has also been applied to news discourse. Research on news reporting has shown that different process types and participant roles contribute to the construction of social reality and ideological positioning. For example, news reports may assign governments the role of Actor through material processes, thereby emphasizing agency and authority, while representing other social groups through relational processes that reduce their active participation in events. Such linguistic choices influence how audiences interpret social and political realities. Studies such as *Framing Social Reality through Language: A Transitivity Analysis of News Discourse in the Philippines* demonstrate how transitivity analysis can reveal media framing strategies and ideological perspectives embedded in contemporary news discourse.

Transitivity analysis has also been widely employed in literary studies, particularly in stylistic and narrative analysis. Simpson (2004) argues that patterns of transitivity contribute significantly to characterization, narrative perspective, and reader interpretation. Characters associated primarily with mental processes are often represented as reflective or introspective, whereas those dominated by material processes tend to be portrayed as active and agentive. Such studies demonstrate the usefulness of transitivity analysis in revealing how linguistic choices contribute to the construction of literary meaning.

In addition, transitivity analysis has increasingly been applied to philosophical and cultural discourse. These studies investigate how different cultural traditions linguistically organize human experience and represent systems of values. Research informed by Systemic Functional Grammar suggests that philosophical concepts may be understood through recurring patterns of process types and participant configurations. In Chinese philosophical discourse, for example, concepts such as harmony, relationality, and the unity of humanity and nature are often represented through relational processes that emphasize interconnectedness rather than individual action. This perspective provides a useful framework for examining how cultural and moral ideologies are encoded in language.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of research on transitivity analysis, most previous studies have concentrated on political speeches, media discourse, and institutional communication. While these studies demonstrate the effectiveness of transitivity analysis in uncovering ideological meanings, they focus primarily on socio-political ideologies rather than moral or philosophical systems of thought. Comparatively little attention has been given to the linguistic representation of ethical values and culturally grounded ideological frameworks.

Furthermore, although philosophical and cultural discourse has received increasing scholarly attention, studies examining Confucian moral ideology through the lens of transitivity analysis remain scarce. Existing research has not sufficiently explored how Halliday's transitivity system may contribute to the interpretation of Confucian virtues and their ideological meanings. This gap highlights the need for a theoretical investigation into the relationship between transitivity processes and Confucian moral values, which forms the focus of the present study.

Conceptual Framework

Transitivity as a Meaning-Making Framework

In M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, transitivity analysis explains how language represents experience through six main types of processes. These are: material processes (processes of doing), which express actions and events; mental processes (processes of sensing), which relate to perception, cognition, and emotion; relational processes (processes of being and having), which describe states of being, identification, and attribution; verbal processes (processes of saying), which involve communication; behavioral processes (processes of behaving), which represent physiological and psychological behaviors; and existential processes (processes of existing), which indicate that something exists. Together, these six process types form the core of the transitivity system, showing how speakers and writers construct different kinds of experiences and meanings in discourse.

(1) Material Processes—Process of doing

It involves actions, activities, and events, which are interpreted through the Transitivity system. In English, a material clause follows specific structural patterns like Actor + Goal (+Recipient). Material processes in transitivity refer to processes of doing, typically involving physical or concrete actions. Halliday describes them as action clauses that show when someone or something carries out an activity, which may be directed toward another participant. These processes can be identified by asking the question, what did X do? In most cases, material processes include two main participants: the Actor, who acts, and the Goal, the person or entity that is affected by the action.

(2) Mental processes—Process of sensing

It involves activities related to sensing, perception, cognition, intention, and emotion, reflecting consciousness. In the context of consciousness, a mental process is configured as Sensor + Phenomenon. Halliday (1994) proposes that the three important sub-types are: 1. Perception, 2. Affections and 3. Cognitions. That's a mental process. There are two participants in the mental process: the Sensor and the Phenomenon. Mental processes highlight cognition, perception, and emotion. These processes can be identified by asking questions such as What do you think/feel/know about X? Typically, they involve two

participants: the Sensor, the conscious being who experiences the process, and the Phenomenon, which is the object of perception, thought, or feeling.

(3) Relational process— Process of Being

Relational process is the process of being. This process describes the relationship of one entity and another entity, which is encoded through three types, namely: 1. Intensive 'x is a' (establishes a relationship of sameness between two entities), 2. Circumstantial 'x is at a' (defines the entity in terms of location, time, manner) 3. Possessive 'x has a' (indicates that one entity owns another). Each of those comes in two modes, they are attributive and identifying. Attributive mode occurs when one entity is used to assign to another. It has two participants, named the carrier and attribute. Then, the identifying mode occurs when one entity is used to identify another. It has two participants, named the identified (token) and the identifier (value)

(4) Behavioral processes— Process of behaving

It involves physiological and psychological behaviors such as smiling, coughing, laughing, and breathing. The process of psychological or mental activity is classified as a behavioral process. These processes sit between mental and physical activities and typically involve only one participant. This main participant, known as the Behaver, is generally a sentient being (Fadilah & Kuswoyo, 2021). According to Halliday (1994), behavioral processes can generally be classified into five main subtypes. The first includes mental activities that are outwardly displayed through behavior, such as looking, watching, and listening. The second subtype refers to verbal actions that function as forms of behavior, including chatting and grumbling. The third category encompasses physical expressions that reveal internal emotional or mental states, such as crying, laughing, smiling, frowning, sighing, snarling, and whining. The fourth group consists of other bodily functions like breathing, coughing, fainting, yawning, and sleeping. Finally, the fifth subtype involves physical postures and leisure activities, such as singing, dancing, lying down, and sitting down.

(5) Verbal processes— Process of saying

It encompasses various forms of communication involving the exchange of symbolic meaning, as defined by Halliday (1987, p.129). Saying is a verbal process employed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). Participants in this process include the speaker/sayer (participant who is the speaker), and the receiver (the one who addressed the information, the beneficiary of a verbal message, occurring with or without a proposition, depending on position in the clause). Verbiage (the verbalization itself) is another term for verbalization.

(6) Existential processes—Process of Existence

It indicates the existence or occurrence of something. The term 'there' is commonly employed in such clauses as a subject filler without a specific function or meaning. Verbs commonly associated with these clauses include 'be', 'exist', 'arise', and other verbs that convey existence. The noun phrase following these verbs is referred to as the 'Existent'. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the existing is any form of phenomenon that a nominal group in the sentence experiences during this process.

Confucian Values

Confucianism (儒教) constitutes an integrated system of ethical, social, educational, and political thought originating in the teachings of Confucius and further elaborated by later scholars. Its central objective is the cultivation of a harmonious social order in which individuals regulate their conduct according to moral principles and rational norms, thereby contributing to social stability and collective prosperity. Emerging in China during the sixth to fifth centuries BCE, Confucianism has functioned not only as a philosophical tradition but also as a sustained way of life, shaping Chinese society, values, and institutions for over two thousand years.

The primary textual sources of Confucian thought include the Analects, a collection of Confucius' sayings compiled by his disciples and transmitted through successive generations, as well as the Four Books and Five Classics, which were later established as the tradition's canonical corpus. Similar to the transmission of ideas in Ancient Greek philosophy, Confucius' followers frequently expanded upon their



teacher's ideas and attributed these interpretations to Confucius himself. At the core of Confucius' philosophical system are several key values, including filial piety (xiao), ritual propriety and ethical conduct (li), humaneness or benevolence (ren), commitment to self-cultivation and learning (haoxue), and the aspiration toward moral excellence embodied in the ideal of the junzi (Matu,2008).

In Confucian philosophy, li (禮), commonly rendered as rites, ritual propriety, or moral norms, refers to regulated forms of behavior that express ethical correctness and cultivated conduct in both social interactions and ceremonial contexts. Observance of li is understood as a marker of the morally refined person, or junzi (君子). Confucius maintains that the cultivation of humaneness (ren, 仁) depends upon adherence to ritual propriety; without such guidance, virtues risk degenerating into excesses—for instance, attentiveness may become hesitation, bravery may turn into rashness, and frankness may lapse into discourtesy. By contrast, practicing the rites contributes to moral discipline and inner cultivation. Within Confucian ethics, virtues such as righteousness (yi, 義), moral wisdom (zhi, 智), and trustworthiness (xin, 信) are subsumed under the broader framework of li, collectively sustaining the realization of ren.

Ren (仁), frequently translated as humaneness, benevolence, compassion, or moral goodness, occupies the highest position in the Confucian ethical hierarchy. In the Analects, Confucius characterizes the person who embodies ren as one who remains balanced in both adversity and success, demonstrates impartial moral discernment, refrains from unethical behavior, and maintains moral integrity even when others depart from righteous conduct. These descriptions underscore ren as the ultimate expression of moral excellence in Confucianism. Moreover, certain interpretations of ren resonate with ethical principles found in Christian thought, particularly the ideal of treating others as one wish to be treated. This ethical orientation is closely connected to the concept of empathy (shu, 恕), which is regarded as an important means through which ren is realized.

In Confucian thought, li (禮) encompasses a comprehensive system of rituals and normative practices governing interpersonal relations. It extends beyond ceremonial rites to include everyday forms of conduct, ranging from linguistic behavior to modes of dress, housing arrangements, and patterns of social interaction. Li also regulates individual activities within social life, such as eating, clothing, movement, greetings, marriage, and festivals, with its specific expressions varying according to social roles, occupational responsibilities, and ceremonial contexts. While li applies universally, its concrete realization differs depending on one's position and function within the social order.

In Confucianism, Yi (義) refers to moral righteousness and the principled judgment of what is right and appropriate in a given situation. Unlike externally prescribed rules or ritualized behavior, Yi emphasizes an internal moral awareness that guides individuals to act according to ethical appropriateness rather than personal interest or social reward. Yi operates as a normative moral standard through which individuals evaluate their actions, social roles, and responsibilities. Moral actions guided by Yi are performed because they are inherently right, regardless of intention or consequence. In this sense, Yi reflects a deontological ethical orientation comparable to Kantian ethics of duty, where moral action is valued as an end in itself rather than a means to achieve external outcomes. As a core Confucian value, Yi thus functions as an internalized moral principle that regulates social conduct and sustains moral order.

In Confucian thought, xin (信) is fundamentally associated with speech and the moral obligation to uphold one's words. The composition of the character itself, combining ren (人, person) and yan (言, speech), indicates that xin concerns the alignment between what a person says and what they subsequently do. This interpretation is consistently supported in the Analects. In Analects 15:5, Confucius states that trustworthiness in one's words enables an individual to act without obstruction even in unfamiliar or adverse social contexts, highlighting the ethical force of credible speech. Similarly, Analects 5:10 emphasizes that moral judgment should not rely solely on spoken claims but on whether actions correspond to words, reinforcing xin as a principle of verbal accountability. Translational interpretations further affirm this association, as xin is frequently rendered as "trustworthiness in word," "making good on one's word," or "keeping one's promises," even when speech is not explicitly mentioned in the original text, such as in



Analects 7:25. Collectively, these textual and interpretive traditions demonstrate that xin functions as an ethical standard governing speech acts and their realization in conduct, positioning it as a key moral value through which credibility and moral agency are established in Confucian discourse.

In Confucianism, zhi (知), commonly translated as “knowledge” or “knowing,” is understood not as abstract or purely intellectual cognition but as a practical and performative form of understanding embedded in social and cultural life. As articulated in the Analects, zhi is closely associated with processes of enculturation, through which individuals internalize inherited moral values, social norms, and exemplary practices from both the past and the present. Hall and Ames (1987) conceptualize zhi as part of a cluster of interrelated Confucian concepts—including xue (learning), si (reflection), and xin (trustworthiness)—that together constitute Confucian “thinking.” Within this framework, knowing is realized through active participation in cultural practices, such as learning through study, reflecting on experience, and demonstrating trustworthiness in speech and conduct. The Analects further emphasize that learning without reflection is ineffective and reflection without learning is potentially harmful, underscoring the necessity of their integration. Consequently, zhi in Confucianism signifies the ability to apply culturally grounded knowledge in practice, guiding individuals to live ethically and responsibly in both private and public spheres.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and theoretical research approach. Rather than conducting an empirical analysis of a specific corpus, the study develops a conceptual framework by synthesizing theories from Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Confucian philosophy. Relevant literature on Halliday’s transitivity system and Confucian ethics was reviewed and analyzed to establish theoretical correspondences between linguistic process types and core Confucian virtues.

Data Sources

The primary conceptual sources for this study were classical Confucian texts, particularly the Analects, together with established scholarly interpretations of Confucian ethics. In addition, key works on Systemic Functional Grammar, especially Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2004) description of the transitivity system, were consulted. The study does not rely on a systematically compiled corpus; instead, it draws upon representative Confucian concepts and textual examples discussed in both primary and secondary sources.

Step 1: Selection of Confucian Virtues

The study focuses on five core Confucian virtues—Ren (benevolence), Yi (righteousness), Li (ritual propriety), Xin (trustworthiness), and Zhi (moral wisdom)—because they are widely recognized in Confucian scholarship as fundamental principles of moral cultivation and social harmony. These virtues were selected based on their centrality in classical Confucian texts, particularly the Analects, and their continuing significance in contemporary interpretations of Confucian ethics.

Step 2: Theoretical Synthesis

A conceptual synthesis was conducted by integrating Halliday’s transitivity framework with key principles of Confucian moral philosophy. Relevant literature from Systemic Functional Grammar and Confucian studies was reviewed to identify conceptual correspondences between linguistic representations of experience and Confucian ethical values.

Step 3: Conceptual Mapping

The final stage involved mapping specific transitivity process types onto Confucian virtues according to their dominant semantic characteristics. Material processes were associated with Yi because both emphasize action and moral responsibility. Mental processes were linked to Zhi because of their focus on cognition, reflection, and moral understanding. Relational processes were connected with Ren because they construct ethical identity and moral attributes. Behavioral processes were associated with Li through their emphasis on socially regulated conduct, while verbal processes were linked to Xin because of their relationship to speech, sincerity, and trustworthiness.



The mapping process was guided by semantic similarity rather than statistical analysis. Each transitivity process type was examined in relation to the central characteristics of the selected Confucian virtues, and conceptual correspondences were established based on theoretical interpretation. The purpose was not to demonstrate definitive one-to-one relationships, but rather to propose a theoretically informed framework that may guide future empirical investigations.

Results

Overview of the Proposed Correspondence between Transitivity Processes and Confucian Virtues
The analysis suggests that different transitivity process types can be conceptually associated with specific Confucian virtues according to their dominant semantic characteristics. The proposed correspondences are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Proposed Correspondence between Transitivity Processes and Confucian Virtues

Transitivity Process Type	Confucian Virtue	Core Meaning
Material Process	Yi (Righteousness)	Moral action, responsibility, and ethical practice
Mental Process	Zhi (Wisdom)	Cognition, reflection, learning, and moral understanding
Relational Process	Ren (Benevolence)	Ethical identity, humaneness, and moral character
Behavioral Process	Li (Ritual Propriety)	Socially regulated conduct and ritual behavior
Verbal Process	Xin (Trustworthiness)	Sincerity, truthful communication, and credibility
Existential Process	Limited correspondence	Existence rather than moral agency or ethical evaluation

This study's conceptual mapping demonstrates that each sort of transitivity process adds uniquely to the depiction of Confucian moral philosophy. Transitivity processes serve as language resources that construct, evaluate, and convey moral values in conversation, rather than acting as independent grammatical categories.

Material Processes and the Representation of Yi (Righteousness)

Among the six types of processes, material processes demonstrate the strongest correlation with the Confucian virtue of Yi (righteousness). Yi emphasizes ethical behavior, moral responsibility, and the willingness to act in alignment with moral integrity rather than pursuing self-interest. Material processes signify particular actions and events, so providing a linguistic representation of moral agency. In Confucian discourse, moral value is often evaluated based on individuals' deeds rather than only their intentions. Consequently, sentences that incorporate material processes highlight the actor's ethical responsibilities and societal duties. These linguistic constructions portray justice as a pragmatic virtue manifested via action. This correlation suggests that Confucian morality is fundamentally action-oriented, emphasizing the application of ethical principles in everyday social interactions.

Mental Processes and the Representation of Zhi (Wisdom)

Mental processes exhibit a strong correlation with the Confucian attribute of Zhi (wisdom). Confucian wisdom encompasses contemplation, self-improvement, education, and ethical discernment. Mental processes, which encompass cognition, perception, and emotion, provide a potent linguistic framework for articulating the internal aspects of moral development. The conceptual relationship suggests that Confucian ethics prioritizes introspective thinking as essential for moral conduct. Linguistic terms related to thinking, knowing, comprehending, remembering, and reflecting symbolically describe the cognitive processes necessary for ethical self-enhancement. Mental processes function as a discursive manifestation of moral awareness and self-improvement.

Relational Processes and the Representation of Ren (Benevolence)



Relational dynamics closely align with Ren (benevolence), considered the paramount virtue in Confucianism. In contrast to Yi, which is largely focused on action, Ren pertains to moral character, ethical identity, and the quality of interpersonal interactions. Relational clauses attribute characteristics and define identities. Consequently, they offer linguistic tools for depicting individuals as altruistic, empathetic, humanistic, or ethically refined. Discourse develops moral identity through attributive and identifying relational frameworks rather than simply recounting conduct. This discovery indicates that benevolence is linguistically portrayed as a consistent ethical attribute ingrained in the individual's social identity.

Behavioral Processes and the Representation of Li (Ritual Propriety)

Behavioral processes demonstrate a significant conceptual connection with Li (ritual propriety). Li regulates suitable social behavior, decorum, and ceremonial practices. Confucianism underscores that appropriate conduct signifies intrinsic moral development. Consequently, behavioral processes serve as language markers of social cohesion and moral self-governance. Discourse emphasizes the significance of observable behavior in upholding social order and meeting societal expectations.

Verbal Processes and the Representation of Xin (Trustworthiness)

Verbal processes relate to Xin (trustworthiness), a virtue linked to honesty, credibility, and sincerity in communication. Verbal processes, which represent actions of speaking and communicating, inherently correspond with Confucian principles of honoring commitments and ensuring coherence between speech and action. In Confucian ethics, reliable communication is considered essential for social stability and interpersonal connections. Verbal processes thus offer linguistic evidence of how speech establishes credibility and moral integrity. The results demonstrate that language operates as a moral activity within Confucian philosophy.

Existential Processes and Moral Context Construction

In contrast to other process types, existential processes exhibit solely an indirect association with Confucian ideals. Their main purpose is to ascertain the presence of beings, situations, or conditions rather than to depict moral agency. Nonetheless, existential processes facilitate the discursive formation of moral reality by portraying ethical principles and social norms as tangible components of the social sphere. Such interpretations render moral ideals as collective social realities instead of mere individual preferences.

Integrated Model of Confucian Moral Representation

The proposed theory posits that Confucian moral philosophy is linguistically disseminated throughout several domains of human experience. Material processes signify ethical actions; mental processes denote moral cognition; relational processes indicate ethical identity; behavioral processes exemplify social conduct; verbal processes reflect moral communication; and existential processes establish the contextual framework of moral norms. Collectively, these process categories constitute an integrated framework for the construction and communication of Confucian ideals. The results demonstrate that Confucian morality is conveyed not by a singular linguistic process, but by the interplay of several experiential meanings within discourse. This multifaceted picture illustrates the comprehensive essence of Confucian ethics, wherein action, cognition, identity, conduct, and communication are interrelated elements of moral development.

Discussions

Material Processes and Yi (Righteousness) in Confucianism

Central to Confucian ethics is the virtue of Yi (righteousness), which emphasizes moral responsibility, ethical action, and the commitment to doing what is right rather than pursuing personal gain (Yao, 2000; Tu, 1985). Within the framework of transitivity analysis, material processes are particularly relevant because they represent actions and events through which individuals interact with the social world (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Since Yi is fundamentally action-oriented, material processes provide an appropriate linguistic resource for representing the enactment of moral responsibility and ethical conduct. Through material processes, discourse can foreground acts of duty, accountability, and



socially responsible behavior, thereby constructing moral agency as something realized through action rather than intention alone. This relationship is reflected in the Analects, where Confucius states that “The gentleman understands righteousness, whereas the petty person understands profit” (Analects 4:16). Consequently, material processes contribute to the representation of Confucian moral praxis by emphasizing the ethical significance of action and responsibility (Eggins, 2004; Bell, 2008).

Mental Processes and Zhi (Wisdom) in Confucianism

In Confucian philosophy, Zhi (wisdom) refers to moral knowledge, sound judgment, and the ability to distinguish right from wrong (Van Norden, 2011; Fung, 1948). From the perspective of transitivity analysis, mental processes represent cognition, perception, reflection, and evaluation, thereby providing linguistic resources for expressing inner experience and intellectual activity (Halliday, 1994; Eggins, 2004). Since Zhi is closely associated with learning, understanding, and moral reflection, mental processes offer a suitable framework for representing the cognitive dimension of Confucian ethics. Through verbs such as think, know, understand, and learn, discourse can portray individuals as engaging in self-cultivation and ethical reasoning. This relationship is illustrated in the Analects, where Confucius observes that “Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous” (Analects 2:15). The verbs “learn” and “think” reflect processes of cognition and reflection, demonstrating the close correspondence between mental processes and the Confucian virtue of Zhi. Such representations emphasize that moral wisdom is achieved through continuous reflection, learning, and intellectual cultivation.

Relational Processes and Ren (Benevolence) in Confucianism

Relational processes play a significant role in the construction of moral identity within Confucian discourse. In Systemic Functional Grammar, relational processes represent processes of being, assigning attributes, and establishing identities through attributive and identifying clauses (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Among the core Confucian virtues, Ren (benevolence) is often understood as the defining characteristic of an ethically cultivated person and the foundation of moral character (Ames & Rosemont, 1998; Yao, 2000). Because relational processes are concerned with describing what a person is and what qualities a person possesses, they provide an effective linguistic resource for representing benevolence as a moral attribute and ethical identity. Through relational clauses, discourse can attribute qualities such as kindness, compassion, and humaneness to individuals, thereby constructing them as moral exemplars. In the Analects, benevolent individuals are frequently characterized through descriptions of moral qualities and ethical identity. Such representations align closely with the function of relational processes in assigning attributes and defining moral status. Consequently, relational processes contribute to the discursive construction of Ren as a central component of Confucian moral ideology.

Behavioral Processes and Li (Ritual Propriety) in Confucianism

In Confucian thought, Li (ritual propriety) refers to appropriate conduct, social etiquette, and the observance of established moral norms that maintain social harmony (Fingarette, 1972; Ames & Rosemont, 1998). Within Halliday’s transitivity framework, behavioral processes occupy an intermediate position between material processes and mental processes, representing outward physiological and psychological behaviors (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Because Li is primarily manifested through observable forms of conduct, behavioral processes provide a particularly suitable linguistic resource for representing ritualized and socially regulated actions. Through behavioral processes, discourse can depict individuals as performing appropriate behaviors that reflect respect, discipline, and adherence to social norms. Confucian teachings consistently emphasize proper conduct in everyday social interaction, and moral character is often evaluated through visible behavior rather than internal intention alone. Therefore, behavioral processes contribute to the linguistic representation of Li by foregrounding disciplined conduct as an expression of ethical commitment and social responsibility (Fairclough, 1995).

Verbal process and Xin in Confucianism

In Confucian philosophy, zhi (智) refers to wisdom understood as moral insight, sound judgment, and the ability to discern right from wrong (Van Norden, 2011; Fung, 1948). Within Halliday’s transitivity system, verbal processes—processes of saying—serve as an important linguistic resource for representing



acts of communication, involving participants such as the Sayer, Receiver, and Verbiage (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). In Confucian discourse, wisdom is not merely an internal cognitive capacity but is also realized through communicative practice. A morally cultivated individual demonstrates zhi through appropriate speech, such as advising, teaching, and guiding others toward ethical behavior (Analects; Ames & Rosemont, 1998). Through these verbal processes, discourse constructs certain speakers as authoritative and knowledgeable, thereby reinforcing the Confucian view that wisdom is enacted through morally responsible communication (Fairclough, 1995). Confucius emphasizes that words should correspond to actions, highlighting the importance of credibility in communication. Because verbal processes represent acts of saying, they provide an appropriate linguistic resource for expressing the Confucian virtue of xin (trustworthiness).

Existential Processes and Their Limited Relevance to Confucian Ethics

Although existential processes are less directly associated with a specific Confucian virtue, they contribute to the construction of moral reality by establishing the existence of ethical principles, social conditions, and normative expectations within discourse. Through existential clauses, speakers can present moral values as socially recognized realities, thereby providing an ontological context within which Confucian virtues may be interpreted and enacted.

This study demonstrates how transitivity analysis within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar can be used to explore the linguistic construction of Confucian moral ideology. By examining different process types, the analysis reveals how core Confucian virtues are represented through specific patterns of linguistic choices in discourse. Material processes highlight moral action and responsibility, reflecting the Confucian virtue of Yi (righteousness). Mental processes foreground cognition, reflection, and ethical understanding, corresponding to Zhi (wisdom). Relational processes construct moral identity and ethical status through the attribution of virtues such as Ren (benevolence) and Li (ritual propriety). Behavioral processes emphasize outward conduct as an expression of ritual propriety and socially regulated behavior, reinforcing the importance of Li in everyday interaction. Verbal processes represent acts of communication and trustworthiness, corresponding to the Confucian virtue of Xin (trustworthiness). Although existential processes are less directly associated with a specific virtue, they contribute to the construction of moral reality by establishing the existence of ethical principles and social norms within discourse.

Through these correspondences between transitivity process types and Confucian virtues, the study illustrates how language functions as a medium through which moral ideology is constructed, communicated, and reinforced. The findings suggest that transitivity analysis provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding how ethical principles and cultural values are linguistically represented, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, ideology, and Confucian moral philosophy.

Conclusion

By mapping core Confucian virtues onto specific transitivity process types, this study demonstrates that moral meaning in Confucian thought is not merely abstract but can be systematically interpreted through linguistic representations of experience. Material processes foreground Yi (righteousness) as action-based moral responsibility; mental processes construe Zhi (moral wisdom) through cognition, reflection, and ethical understanding; relational processes construct Ren (benevolence) and Li (ritual propriety) through the attribution of moral qualities and ethical identities; behavioral processes render Li visible through socially regulated conduct; and verbal processes realize Xin (trustworthiness) through sincere and responsible communication.

Overall, the findings suggest that Confucian ideology is linguistically encoded through process types that foreground agency, cognition, identity, behavior, and communication. Through transitivity



choices, discourse does not merely describe Confucian values; rather, it actively constructs and reinforces a moral worldview centered on ethical action, self-cultivation, social harmony, and moral responsibility. The study contributes to Systemic Functional Linguistics by extending the application of transitivity analysis beyond political and institutional discourse to the domain of moral philosophy. In addition, it contributes to cross-cultural discourse studies by establishing a conceptual connection between Halliday's linguistic theory and the ethical tradition of Confucianism. By integrating linguistic analysis with Confucian ethical thought, the proposed framework offers a new perspective for understanding how moral ideology is represented and communicated through language. This study is conceptual and theoretical in nature and does not involve empirical corpus analysis. Therefore, the proposed framework should be regarded as a preliminary model that requires further validation through future empirical studies based on Confucian texts and discourse data.

Contribution

The present study contributes new knowledge to the fields of discourse analysis, Systemic Functional Grammar, and Confucian studies by proposing a theoretical framework that links transitivity process types with core Confucian virtues. Unlike previous transitivity research, which has largely focused on political and institutional discourse, this study demonstrates the potential of transitivity theory for analyzing moral and philosophical systems of thought. The proposed framework provides a foundation for future empirical investigations of Confucian discourse and expands the scope of moral discourse analysis by showing how ethical values may be interpreted through linguistic representations of experience. More broadly, the study highlights the value of integrating Western linguistic theory with Chinese philosophical traditions to achieve a deeper understanding of ideology, morality, and meaning-making in discourse. The study also contributes to moral discourse analysis by extending the application of transitivity theory from political discourse to the interpretation of philosophical and ethical traditions.

Recommendation

Future studies are recommended to apply transitivity analysis to empirical data, such as classical Confucian texts, educational discourse, political speeches, and contemporary media discourse, in order to further examine how Confucian ideology is linguistically constructed in different sociocultural contexts. Future research may employ corpus-based linguistic methods to investigate the frequency and distribution of transitivity process types across different forms of discourse and to determine whether particular process types are systematically associated with specific Confucian virtues.

In addition, comparative studies between Confucian discourse and other moral or philosophical traditions may provide deeper insights into the relationship between language, ideology, and culture. Researchers may also conduct comparative quantitative analyses between historical and contemporary discourse to examine how Confucian moral values are maintained, adapted, or transformed across different sociocultural contexts.

Furthermore, future studies may combine qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative corpus techniques to empirically test and refine the theoretical framework proposed in this study. Such approaches would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how moral ideology is represented through language and would further validate the applicability of transitivity analysis in cross-cultural discourse research.



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