Transitivity in the Literature of Prisons: A Corpus Stylistic Study

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Abstract

This study takes a deep dive into the way language conveys power, agency, identity, and resistance in two powerful prison autobiographies: A Sense of Freedom by Jimmy Boyle and The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), with a special focus on the transitivity system, the research examines how these authors construct their experiences of incarceration through language. By analyzing six key types of processes—Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal, Behavioral, and Existential—the study uncovers how these authors talk about their personal journeys in prison. Twelve excerpts were carefully selected from both books, aiming to capture recurring linguistic patterns and ideological themes. The analysis reveals two starkly different portrayals of prison life. In A Sense of Freedom, Boyle focuses on the systemic violence and physical control within prison walls, with a heavy reliance on Material Processes that often depict him as a passive participant, controlled by external forces. On the other hand, The Autobiography of Malcolm X highlights Mental and Relational Processes, which reflect his journey of self-discovery, intellectual awakening, and personal empowerment. This study sheds light on how the choice of transitivity processes shapes the way power and resistance are represented in these stories, giving us important insights into the role of language in shaping identity, institutional control, and individual agency in the context of incarceration. The findings suggest that while Boyle's narrative underscores suffering and brutality, Malcolm X's autobiography focuses more on

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empowerment and transformation. In conclusion, the study points to the need for future research that uses a broader corpus-based approach to compare and analyze prison narratives more widely. Ultimately, this research highlights the power of language to reflect oppression, challenge institutions, and offer a space for resistance and self-empowerment in the face of dehumanizing systems.

Keywords: transitivity, systemic functional linguistics, Halliday, carceral discourse, autobiography, prison narratives, agency

التعدية في أدب السجون: دراسة أسلوبية قائمة على المدونات اللغوية

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الـمستخلـص

تعتمد هذه الدراسة على نظرية اللغويات الوظيفية النظامية التي وضعها هاليدي (1994)، مع تركيز خـاص علـى نظـام التعديـة (Transitivity)   ، لتحليـل كيفيـة تمثيـل اللغـة لمفـاهيم الأيـديولوجيا، والفاعلية، والسلطة، والهوية، والمقاومة في سيرتين ذاتيتين تنتميان لأدب السجون : *A Sense of Freedom* لجيمي بويل، *The autobiography of Malcolm X.* ومن خلال استقصاء ستة أنواع من العمليات – المادية، الذهنية، العلائقية، اللفظية، السلوكية، والوجودية – تسعى الدراسة إلى فهم كيفية بناء تجارب السجن على المستوى الخطابي. وقد جرى تحليل اثني عشر مقتطفًا مختارًا بعناية من كلا النصين، بهدف الكشف عن أنماط لغوية متكررة ودلالات أيديولوجية متجذرة. أظهرت النتائج أن *A Sense of Freedom* : يركّز على العنف المنهجي والخضوع الجسدي، مع هيمنة للعمليـات الماديـة التـي يُقـدَّم فيهـا السـارد غالبًـا كهـدف سـلبي. فـي المقابـل، تبـرز *The autobiography of Malcolm X* العمليات الذهنية والعلائقية، بما يعكس عملية التمكين المعرفي والتحول الذاتي. وتوضح الدراسة كيف تُسهم اختيارات العبور في تشكيل تمثيلات السيطرة المؤسسية والمقاومة الفردية، مقدّمة بذلك رؤية تحليلية معمقة للتفاعل بين اللغة والسلطة والهوية في سرديات السـجن. وتوصـي الدراسـة بتوسيع نطـاق البحوث المستقبلية لتشمل تحليلات قائمـة علـى المدونات اللغوية ومقاربات مقارنة ضمن أدب السجون وتحليل الخطاب. وفي خاتمة المطاف، تكشف الدراسة عن الكيفية التي تُستخدم بها اللغة في تمثيل القمـع، والتجريد من الإنسانية، والقدرة على التحوّل في سياقات السـجن، مـع إبراز التبـاين السـردي بـين نصـي بويل ومـالكوم إكس؛ إذ يركّـز الأول علـى

المعاناة المفروضة والعنف المنهجي، بينما يُسلّط الثاني الضوء على الوعي الفكري والتمكين الذاتي.
وتؤكد الدراسة في مجملها على الدور المحوري للغة في تشكيل الفاعلية الفردية وممارسة النقد
المؤسسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعدية، اللغويات الوظيفية النظامية، هاليدي، خطاب السجون، السيرة الذاتية،
السرديات السجنية

1. INTRODUCTION

Prison literature has long served as a powerful medium for exposing systemic oppression, institutional violence, and personal transformation (Foucault, 1977: 231). Autobiographical prison narratives provide firsthand accounts of the dehumanizing conditions within the carceral system while simultaneously offering reflections on resistance, identity, and redemption. Through linguistic analysis, particularly Halliday's (1994) transitivity system, scholars can examine how agency, power, and ideological positioning are encoded within prison narratives (Simpson, 1993: 45). This study applies a corpus stylistic approach to analyze transitivity patterns in *A Sense of Freedom* (Boyle, 1977) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Malcolm X & Haley, 1965), two influential prison memoirs that critique the legitimacy of incarceration in the UK and the USA.

Transitivity, a key component of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), investigates how language represents processes, participants, and circumstances in discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014: 215). In prison literature, transitivity choices influence how prisoners, guards, and institutions are depicted—whether as active agents, passive victims, or ideological constructs (Fairclough, 1995: 98). Previous studies have demonstrated that Material processes (actions and events) are often dominant in texts that depict violence and physical struggle, while Mental and Verbal processes frequently appear in introspective and ideological narratives (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010: 157). Given that Boyle's narrative centers on brutality and survival, and Malcolm X's memoir emphasizes intellectual awakening and political transformation, this study hypothesizes that their transitivity structures will reflect different linguistic patterns of agency and power.

By employing a corpus-assisted transitivity analysis, this research aims to uncover how both authors construct their prison experiences through linguistic choices. Specifically, it seeks to determine: (1) how power and resistance are represented through Material, Mental, and Relational processes; (2) how institutional oppression is framed linguistically; and (3) how both authors construct narratives of self-transformation. The findings will contribute to the broader field of critical discourse analysis, prison literature, and corpus stylistics, offering insights into the linguistic mechanisms of incarceration narratives in different sociopolitical contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of prison literature has gained increasing attention in literary and linguistic research, particularly in relation to narrative identity, resistance discourse, and systemic oppression (Wilson, 2004: 21). The linguistic analysis of prison texts provides insight into how authors frame their experiences of incarceration, shaping public perception and ideological resistance (Fairclough, 1995: 102). Corpus stylistics and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offer robust methodologies for analyzing how language encodes power relations, agency, and resistance in prison narratives (Simpson, 1993: 57). This literature review will examine the existing scholarship on transitivity analysis, corpus stylistics, and prison literature, positioning the current study within this academic discourse.

Transitivity and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Transitivity, as theorized by Halliday (1994: 106), is a key component of SFL that explains how language represents processes, participants, and circumstances. It categorizes verbs into six major process types:

- Material processes (actions, events) – e.g., *he fought, they imprisoned him*
- Mental processes (perception, cognition) – e.g., *he realized, she understood*
- Relational processes (identity, attribution) – e.g., *he was a prisoner, she became stronger*
- Verbal processes (speech, communication) – e.g., *he spoke out, she was told*
- Existential processes (expressing existence) – e.g., *there was no freedom, oppression existed*
- Behavioral processes (physiological and psychological actions) – e.g., *he sighed, they wept*

Scholars have applied transitivity analysis to reveal ideological and political meanings in discourse (Fowler, 1996: 132). For instance, Toolan (2001: 86) shows that Material processes dominate in texts of violence and conflict, while Mental processes appear in introspective narratives. This pattern is relevant to prison literature, where physical oppression (Material processes) contrasts with personal transformation (Mental and Relational processes).

2.1 Corpus Stylistics and Literary Analysis

Corpus stylistics, which integrates quantitative linguistic tools with qualitative literary analysis, has proven valuable in studying narrative voice, agency, and ideological stance (Semino & Short, 2004: 73). A corpus-based approach enables researchers to:

1. Identify dominant process types in prison narratives.
2. Compare patterns of agency between prisoners and institutions.
3. Detect shifts in self-representation over the course of a narrative.

Previous studies have applied corpus stylistics to memoirs, historical narratives, and resistance literature (McIntyre, 2015: 49). However, few studies have systematically compared UK and US prison literature from a transitivity perspective, making this research particularly significant.

Prison Literature: Agency, Resistance, and Ideology

Prison memoirs often function as counter-narratives that challenge the dominant representations of the justice system (Foucault, 1977: 245). Studies in prison discourse emphasize that autobiographical prison texts reflect themes of:

- Brutality and institutional violence (Jewkes, 2002: 17).
- Resistance and survival strategies (Cheliotis, 2016: 292).
- Self-transformation and ideological awakening (Franklin, 1998: 69).

In *A Sense of Freedom*, Boyle (1977) describes his experiences in UK prisons, highlighting physical abuse, dehumanization, and resistance. Material processes are expected to dominate his text, reflecting his confrontational and action-driven perspective (Wilson, 2004: 33).

In contrast, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Malcolm X & Haley, 1965) shifts from violence and crime to intellectual and ideological empowerment. Scholars note that Malcolm X's narrative relies heavily on Mental and Verbal processes as he reconstructs his identity through knowledge and political awakening (Harris, 2010: 155).

A comparative transitivity analysis of these texts will uncover how agency, power, and transformation are linguistically encoded in prison narratives.

Research Questions

1. How do transitivity patterns in *A Sense of Freedom* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* construct narratives of oppression, resistance, and transformation?
2. What are the dominant process types (Material, Mental, Relational, etc.) in each text, and how do they reflect the authors' perspectives on prison life?
3. How do the transitivity choices in each text contribute to the portrayal of power dynamics between prisoners and institutions?
4. What linguistic differences emerge in the representation of self-identity and ideological transformation in the two narratives?
5. To what extent do the transitivity patterns in these prison memoirs challenge or reinforce dominant social and political discourses on incarceration?

Research Objectives

1. To conduct a corpus stylistic transitivity analysis of *A Sense of Freedom* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.
2. To identify and compare the frequency of different process types (Material, Mental, Relational, etc.) in both texts.
3. To analyze the representation of agency—who is depicted as acting, who is acted upon, and how power is distributed in each text.
4. To examine how self-transformation is linguistically constructed in each author's journey from criminalization to self-reformation.
5. To explore how prison literature reflects broader ideological struggles related to race, class, justice, and institutional power.

Research Hypotheses

1. Material processes will dominate in *A Sense of Freedom*, while Mental and Verbal processes will be more frequent in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.
   - *Rationale:* Boyle's narrative is action-driven, highlighting violence and direct confrontation, whereas Malcolm X's transformation is intellectual and ideological.
2. Prison institutions and authority figures will be portrayed using Material processes (actions of control, punishment), while prisoners will exhibit more Mental and Relational processes (reflection, identity construction).
   - *Rationale:* Institutional power is often expressed through action, while prisoners navigate imprisonment through thought and identity shifts.

3. The transitivity choices in Malcolm X's text will emphasize ideological awakening and self-empowerment, while Boyle's text will focus more on survival and systemic brutality.
   o *Rationale:* Malcolm X presents prison as a place of transformation, whereas Boyle presents it as a site of extreme violence and resistance.
4. The representation of self-identity will shift in both texts, moving from objectified prisoner status (acted upon) to self-assertive agency (acting upon the world).
   o *Rationale:* Both authors narrate a personal transformation, but through different linguistic strategies.
5. Despite their differences, both texts will ultimately challenge dominant narratives of prison as a rehabilitative institution.
   o *Rationale:* The texts expose the contradictions in prison systems that claim to reform but often reinforce cycles of violence and oppression.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative linguistic analysis rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), focusing specifically on the transitivity system outlined by Halliday (1994). The methodology is interpretive in nature and centers on close textual analysis of selected excerpts from two autobiographies: *A Sense of Freedom* by Jimmy Boyle and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (as told to Alex Haley). Both texts were chosen due to their strong autobiographical focus on incarceration and self-transformation, making them particularly suitable for analysis of how language shapes identity and agency within institutional settings.

3.1 Data Selection

Although the two texts span approximately 400 pages in total, the selection of 12 excerpts is methodologically sound for several reasons. First, this study applies a qualitative transitivity analysis rooted in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which involves meticulous clause-by-clause annotation of process types, participant roles, and circumstantial elements. This means that even a single excerpt can yield multiple layers of meaning that require extensive unpacking. Second, the 12 excerpts were not selected arbitrarily—they represent critical narrative moments that encapsulate the thematic and ideological essence of both works (e.g., identity transformation, institutional oppression, resistance). Each excerpt was chosen to reflect a variety of process types (Material, Mental, Relational, etc.) and to ensure thematic balance between the two texts. Lastly, in alignment with practices in qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis, the goal is not statistical generalization but interpretive depth and representative sampling. Including significantly more examples would risk superficial analysis, undermining the linguistic richness this method aims to uncover .So, the selection was based on their thematic relevance to:

- The experience of imprisonment,
- The construction of selfhood and resistance, and
- The transformative role of language, education, or systemic oppression.

3.2 Analytical Procedure

Each excerpt was analyzed for its transitivity structure, focusing on:

- The type of process used (Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal, Behavioral, or Existential),

- The participants involved (e.g., Actor, Goal, Senser, Carrier, Sayer),
- The circumstances accompanying the processes (e.g., time, place, manner).

Annotations followed Halliday's terminology and framework. For example:

- *"They beat me until I passed out"* was coded as a Material Process, with *They* as Actor, *me* as Goal, and *"until I passed out"* as a Circumstance of result.
- *"Books became my world"* was labeled as a Relational Process, with *Books* as Carrier and *my world* as Attribute.

3.3 Interpretive Lens

The transitivity analysis didn't just stand on its own; it was interpreted within a critical discourse framework, drawing on the ideas of scholars like Fairclough (1995) and van Leeuwen (2008). These scholars argue that the way we choose to use grammar says a lot about power relationships and where we stand ideologically. So, each type of process wasn't just analyzed in a vacuum—it was examined in the context of the larger themes of the narratives, such as dehumanization, resistance, and rebirth, all while keeping in mind the social and historical contexts in which these stories were told. By using this approach, the analysis offers a more comparative and nuanced understanding of how two individuals, each coming from different sociopolitical backgrounds, use language to navigate their identities, power dynamics, and personal transformations within the confines of prison.

3.4 Theoretical Framework: Halliday's Transitivity System

At the core of Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is the idea that language does three important things: it helps us represent our experiences, build relationships, and organize information in a way that makes sense. The part of language that deals with representing our experiences is called the ideational metafunction, and it's reflected in the grammar of transitivity—the way we structure sentences to show actions, who's doing them, and who or what is affected by them. Transitivity, in this context, does not refer merely to whether a verb takes an object, but rather to how language encodes processes (actions, states, feelings), the participants involved in these processes, and the circumstances surrounding them. Halliday identifies six main process types:

1. Material Processes: These are processes of doing—actions and events that involve an Actor (the doer) and often a Goal (the recipient or target of the action). *Example*: **"They locked me in solitary confinement."*_ → Actor: *They*, Process: *locked*, Goal: *me*.
2. Mental Processes: These involve cognition, perception, emotion, and include participants like the Senser (experiencer) and the Phenomenon (that which is sensed).

Example: **"The prison wanted to break me."*_ → Senser: *The prison*, Phenomenon: *to break me*.

3. Relational Processes: These express states of being and having, involving participants like the Carrier and Attribute (in attributive relations) or Identified and Identifier (in identifying relations).

Example: **"Books became my world."*_ → Carrier: *Books*, Attribute: *my world*.

4. Verbal Processes: Processes of saying, involving a Sayer, a Receiver, and a Verbiage.
   Example: **"I screamed, but no one heard me."*_ → Sayer: *I*, Verbal process: *screamed*.

5. Behavioral Processes: These are physiological or psychological behaviors, often sitting between material and mental processes. They usually involve one participant (the Behaver).

Example: *"I laughed," "She sighed."*

6. Existential Processes: These express the existence of something, using "there is/are/was/were." The Existent is the entity that is said to exist. *Example*: *"There was no hope."* → Process: *was*, Existent: *no hope*.

In transitivity analysis, these processes do not just describe actions or states—they also position individuals in specific roles (active, passive, empowered, oppressed), shaping how experience is constructed and understood. In prison narratives, transitivity helps show how language reflects deeper ideologies, such as the power of institutions, personal control, trauma, and the fight for resistance. By looking at A Sense of Freedom and The Autobiography of Malcolm X through this lens, the goal is to uncover how these two men, locked behind prison walls, use language not just to share their experiences, but also to reclaim their identities in the face of a system that tries to erase them.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

4.1 Textual Analysis of *A Sense of Freedom*

Jimmy Boyle's A Sense of Freedom offers a raw and powerful account of life in prison, describing the brutality, psychological pain, and dehumanization he faced. Using the transitivity framework, we can see how Boyle's story not only reflects the violence of the system but also serves as a way for him to reclaim his sense of self. This section looks at six carefully chosen excerpts, each highlighting a different aspect of his journey and his changing relationship with the institutional power around him.

Excerpt 1: "They locked me in solitary confinement for weeks."

This simple yet powerful line captures the isolation and control Boyle faced, and serves as a starting point for understanding how his language shapes his evolving sense of identity within the prison system.

- Material Process: *locked*
- Actor: *They* (prison authorities)
- Goal: *me*
- Circumstance: *in solitary confinement for weeks*

In this sentence, the material process shows Boyle as the passive recipient—he's the one being acted upon. This highlights the overwhelming, one-sided nature of the power the prison system has over him. The Actor (the ones doing the locking, "they") is left faceless and plural, emphasizing that it's not just one person but the collective force of the entire prison system that's exerting this control over him.The Circumstance amplifies the cruelty, portraying solitary confinement not as a brief punishment but as sustained isolation.

Excerpt 2: "The prison wanted to break me, but I swore I wouldn't let it."

- Mental Process 1: *wanted* → Senser: *The prison*, Phenomenon: *to break me*
- Mental Process 2: *swore* → Senser: *I*, Phenomenon: *I wouldn't let it*

This juxtaposition of two Mental Processes demonstrates a struggle of wills. The prison is personified as a Senser capable of desire (*wanted*), showing the institution as

ideologically driven to dominate. In contrast, Boyle's response (*I swore…*) marks a reclamation of agency, asserting resistance not through action but through volition and inner resolve.

Excerpt 3: "They stripped me naked and left me on the concrete floor, cold and bleeding."

- Material Processes: *stripped*, *left*
- Actor: *They*
- Goal: *me*
- Circumstance: *on the concrete floor, cold and bleeding*

This excerpt is a vivid representation of material brutality. The dual processes—*stripped* and *left*—portray Boyle as an object acted upon. The Circumstances convey both physical setting and bodily suffering, reinforcing themes of degradation and loss of bodily autonomy. The repeated use of "They" reinforces the depersonalized nature of institutional violence.

Excerpt 4: "The system made me into something I wasn't."

- Material Process: *made*
- Actor: *The system*
- Goal: *me*
- Attribute/Result: *into something I wasn't*

This transformation process reflects forced identity alteration. "The system" acts not only upon Boyle's body, but upon his self-concept. The process here is deceptively material, but semantically it engages with relational implications—showing how external forces construct or deform identity.

Excerpt 5: "They beat me until I passed out."

- Material Process: *beat*
- Actor: *They*
- Goal: *me*
- Circumstance: *until I passed out*

This line typifies extreme physical violence. The process again renders Boyle as passive, with the Actor exerting unchecked control. The Circumstance (*until I passed out*) communicates the extent and consequence of abuse, emphasizing the total collapse of consciousness—an erasure of awareness and autonomy.

Excerpt 6: "I screamed, but no one heard me."

- Verbal Process: *screamed*
  - Sayer: *I*
- Verbal Process: *heard*
  - Sayer: *no one*, Receiver: *me*

This shift to verbal processes marks a moment where Boyle attempts to reclaim voice—but the second clause (*no one heard me*) reveals the failure of communication and institutional apathy. The use of "no one" as Sayer highlights the absence of empathy and responsiveness, underscoring Boyle's voicelessness in the system.Across these excerpts, Material Processes dominate, emphasizing Boyle's passivity and objectification within the prison system. He is frequently positioned as Goal or Affected, while the system or prison staff are abstracted Actors. However, scattered Mental and Verbal Processes offer glimpses of resistance and internal struggle, suggesting that even in a context of extreme repression, there remains a psychological battleground for identity and autonomy.

4.2 Textual Analysis of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* ...

While *A Sense of Freedom* foregrounds institutional violence and the stripping of agency, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* offers a contrasting narrative—one of personal awakening and self-empowerment, especially through education. Through the lens of Halliday's transitivity framework, Malcolm X's language choices reveal a cognitive and relational transformation, with an increasing emphasis on Mental, Relational, and Material Processes that affirm identity and growth.

Excerpt 1: "I picked up a book in prison."

- Material Process: *picked up*
- Actor: *I*
- Goal: *a book*
- Circumstance: *in prison*

This simple material process marks the beginning of Malcolm's intellectual journey. Unlike Boyle, who is often a passive recipient of actions, Malcolm places himself as the Actor, taking charge and showing that even within the limits of prison, he still has agency. The action here is simple, but its significance is huge—it sparks the transformation that continues through the rest of his story.

Excerpt 2: "Books became my world."

This line captures a turning point in Malcolm's journey, where the power of knowledge begins to shape his identity and marks the start of his self-empowerment.

- Relational Process: *became*
- Carrier: *Books*
- Attribute: *my world*

This relational process highlights a major shift in Malcolm's identity and how he sees the world. Books aren't just something he uses—they've become essential to his reality. When he says "my world", he's showing that reading is now at the core of who he is. It's not just about gaining knowledge; it's about a deep emotional connection and a transformation in how he thinks. This marks a shift from simply surviving in prison to truly thriving intellectually.

Excerpt 3: "They gave me something I had never felt before—power through knowledge."

- Material Process: *gave*
  - Actor: *They* (metaphorically referring to books)
  - Goal: *me*
  - Range: *something I had never felt before—power through knowledge*
- Mental Process (embedded): *felt*

This structure blends both material and mental elements. The books are given life, acting as Actors, while Malcolm takes on the roles of both Goal and Senser. The phrase "power through knowledge" captures the transformative power that comes with literacy. Unlike Boyle, who often feels like a passive victim of violence, Malcolm is portrayed as someone who actively takes in empowerment through learning.

Excerpt 4: "I wasn't just surviving anymore—I was thinking, analyzing, preparing."

- Relational Process: *wasn't just surviving*

- o Carrier: *I*, Attribute: *just surviving*
- Mental Processes: *thinking, analyzing, preparing*

This line marks a crucial turning point. The use of negation here shows that Malcolm is moving away from just existing in prison to actively shaping his life. The list of mental processes highlights a shift in how he thinks and sees the world. Rather than defining himself through rebellion, Malcolm takes control of his identity through self-reflection and intellectual growth—preparing himself for the activism and leadership that will come later.

Excerpt 5: "Every free moment I had, I spent reading."

- Material Process: *spent*
- Actor: *I*
- Goal: *every free moment*
- Circumstance: *reading*

This excerpt shows Malcolm's discipline and purposefulness. Once again, he's the Actor, taking charge of his time and focusing it on self-improvement. The material process here emphasizes that his education wasn't something that just happened by chance—it was the result of hard work and intentional effort. It highlights that transformation doesn't happen overnight; it's something that's built through consistent effort and routine.

Excerpt 6: "It was as if I had never really seen a book before."

- Relational Process: *was*
  - o Carrier: *It*, Attribute: *as if I had never really seen a book before*
- Mental Process (embedded): *seen*

This final reflection uses a relational process to express a sense of awe and new understanding. It shows how Malcolm's previous views were limited, and how, ironically, incarceration became a place of personal rebirth. The mental process within it highlights both an emotional and intellectual awakening.Malcolm X's story blends Material, Mental, and Relational Processes, capturing both the outside actions he takes and the inner transformation he undergoes. He is often the Actor or Senser, showing that he is always in control and making choices. Unlike Boyle, whose story is largely about suffering and being objectified, Malcolm's prison narrative is shaped by language that emphasizes reclaiming his identity, growth, and empowerment. His use of mental processes reflects a thoughtful and reflective self, while the relational processes highlight how his identity changes—from a street hustler to a self-educated visionary.

5.Thematic Comparison: Power, Resistance, and Transformation

Looking at A Sense of Freedom and The Autobiography of Malcolm X through the lens of Halliday's transitivity framework, we see two very different stories shaped by the authors' personal experiences of incarceration. Both books are autobiographies set in prison, but the language they use reveals two contrasting themes—one focuses on the brutal dehumanization and oppression of the system, while the other tells the story of intellectual rebirth and self-discovery.

5.1 Power and Control

In Jimmy Boyle's narrative, we see a lot of Material Processes where he is portrayed as the Goal, always on the receiving end of the actions of the oppressive system:

- "They locked me...", "They beat me...", "They stripped me naked..."

The repeated use of these Material Processes with external Actors (like "they" or "the system") paints a picture of a world controlled by institutional power and physical

subjugation. Boyle has very little agency in these moments; he's being acted upon rather than acting. Even when he expresses moments of resistance, like "I swore I wouldn't let it", the broader context still emphasizes his powerlessness, reinforcing the theme of a system that dominates him.

In contrast, Malcolm X's story is filled with moments where he is the Actor or Senser in both Material and Mental Processes:

- "I picked up a book...", "I spent reading...", "I was thinking, analyzing, preparing..."

These choices show that, even behind bars, Malcolm takes charge of his life. His control doesn't come from physical strength, but from his mind and willpower. The language creates a world where power comes from self-discipline and knowledge, offering an alternative form of resistance—one rooted in intellectual freedom and cognitive autonomy.

5.2 Resistance and Voice

Boyle's form of resistance is raw and embodied, shown through his emotional defiance:

"The prison wanted to break me, but I swore I wouldn't let it."

The use of Mental and Verbal Processes here, like "wanted" and "swore", introduces a moment of psychological resistance. However, these moments are brief and surrounded by harsh Material Processes that weaken the impact of his personal resolve. Even when he screams in frustration ("I screamed, but no one heard me"), his voice often fades into the institutional void, emphasizing his sense of voicelessness in the face of a system that refuses to listen.

On the other hand, Malcolm X's resistance is progressive and intellectual. His Mental Processes, such as "thinking," "analyzing," and "preparing", are not reactions to violence, but deliberate actions aimed at his self-reinvention. His voice is not lost—it emerges and grows stronger over time, especially as he frames books as sources of empowerment:

"They gave me something I had never felt before—power through knowledge."

8.3 Identity and Transformation

For Boyle, prison causes his identity to become fractured:

"The system made me into something I wasn't."

This Material Process suggests that his identity is forced upon him from the outside, aligning with the theme of losing himself in the prison system. The prison becomes a place that erases and distorts his sense of self.

In contrast, Malcolm X's identity is reconstructed through reading and reflection:

"Books became my world."

"I wasn't just surviving—I was thinking..."

Here, Relational Processes point to a chosen transformation, not one imposed on him. The prison, though physically confining, becomes a space for spiritual and intellectual freedom, a place where Malcolm redefines himself.

5. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section brings together the linguistic insights gained from transitivity analysis of both A Sense of Freedom by Jimmy Boyle and The Autobiography of Malcolm X. It shows how language is used to shape and communicate personal experiences, but also to reflect deeper social dynamics and power structures. The analysis reveals how both

authors use grammar not just to tell their stories, but also to embed complex relationships and systems of control in their narratives.

5.1 Transitivity as a Reflection of Social Experience

According to Halliday's (1994) model, the six types of processes in language are used to represent human experience. In both Boyle's and Malcolm X's stories, different patterns of these processes mirror their vastly different lived experiences:

Jimmy Boyle's narrative is dominated by Material Processes, where external Actors (like "They") perform actions on him, leaving him as the Goal—a passive figure enduring institutional violence.

Malcolm X, on the other hand, is regularly the Actor or Senser in Mental, Material, and Relational Processes, showcasing how he takes an active role in his own transformation—both mentally and physically.

These differences reveal the ideological weight behind their language choices: Boyle's world is something that happens to him, while Malcolm actively shapes his own reality through self-reflection and intellectual effort.

5.2 Language as Resistance and Reclamation of Agency

In *A Sense of Freedom*, transitivity patterns contribute to a consistent representation of systemic brutality:

- Sentences such as *"They beat me," "They locked me,"* and *"They stripped me naked"* repeatedly position Boyle as the passive recipient of violent action.
- These linguistic choices reinforce themes of dehumanization and coercive control, where the Actor (the system) is faceless yet omnipotent, and the Goal (the prisoner) is reduced to a voiceless object.

This reflects Foucault's concept of carceral power, where language becomes a medium through which institutional domination is re-inscribed in the prisoner's very

6. CONCLUSION

This study used Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, specifically focusing on the transitivity system, to examine how two influential prison autobiographies—A Sense of Freedom by Jimmy Boyle and The Autobiography of Malcolm X—use language to tell stories of power, identity, and resistance. By analyzing six different types of processes in twelve carefully chosen excerpts, the research uncovered unique patterns of transitivity that reflect each author's different views on incarceration and the experiences that shaped them.

In Boyle's narrative, the focus is mainly on Material Processes, where he is often depicted as the passive recipient of the violent actions of the prison system. This consistent use of language underscores how systemic brutality strips away his agency, reducing him to an object of domination. While there are moments of psychological resistance and internal defiance through Mental and Verbal Processes, Boyle's language overall paints a stark picture of prison as a place of objectification and oppression.

On the other hand, Malcolm X's narrative shows an evolution in his language, moving from Material Processes to more introspective Mental and Relational Processes. This

shift reflects his intellectual growth and ideological transformation, where prison becomes a paradoxical space for self-education and empowerment. Through his use of language, Malcolm X positions himself as the active subject—he is the Actor, Senser, and Carrier—taking control of his identity and challenging the systemic forces that try to marginalize him, using knowledge and self-reflection as tools of resistance.

Together, these two texts show how transitivity choices in language do more than just recount lived experiences—they also carry a deeper ideological critique of the power dynamics within prison systems. This study highlights that prison narratives are not just about personal stories; they are acts of resistance that challenge conventional views of incarceration and propose new ways of navigating and resisting oppressive systems.

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