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## A Stylistic Study of "The School" by Donald Barthelme

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### Abstract

Unfolding meanings, aims, purposes, and other targets through the dissection of the language is possible but not trouble-free since the procedure needs an obvious awareness of the structure of the language and a deep insight into the text. This paper tries to analyze "The School", a short story by Donald Barthelme, stylistically by using the transitivity system, which is based on Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), to reach the meanings which lie behind the words. The transitivity system is devised by Michael Halliday (1925-2018 -the British linguist), which consists of several process types. This

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system can externalize the meanings of the text through its clauses. Thus, the task of the present paper, as it is stated formerly, is to analyze the clauses in the chosen text adapting Halliday's transitivity system to obtain meanings related to the nature of the story. And analyzing the clauses of Barthelme's story, the nature of the story and the meanings are revealed as the study's major findings.

**Key Word** : stylistics; "The School"; Barthelme; Systemic Functional Grammar; the transitivity system; Halliday

## دراسة أسلوبية عن "المدرسة" بقلم دونالد بارثيلمى

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### المستخلص

كشف المعاني والأهداف والأغراض والأهداف الأخرى من خلال تشریح اللغة أمر ممكن ولكنه لا يخلو من المتاعب، لأن الإجراء يحتاج إلى وعي واضح ببنية اللغة ونظرة عميقة في النص. تحاول هذه الدراسة تحليل "المدرسة" قصة قصيرة لدونالد بيثرلم بطريقة أسلوبية باستخدام نظام الانتقال للوصول إلى المعاني الكامنة وراء الكلمات. ابتكر مايكل هاليدي (1925-2018 - اللغوي البريطاني) نظام التحويل (Transitivity System)، والذي يتكون من عدة أنواع من العمليات. يمكن لهذا النظام أن يخرج المعاني من النص من خلال فقراته، وبالتالي فإن مهمة هذه الدراسة، كما ذكر سابقاً، هي تحليل العبارات في النص المختار لتكييف نظام Halliday الانتقالي لاختيار المعاني المتعلقة بطبيعة القصة. وبتحليل فقرات قصة بارثيلمى، تم الكشف عن طبيعة القصة ومعانيها كأهم نتائج الدراسة.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الأسلوبية، النظام الوظيفي القواعدي .

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1.Halliday's Transitivity System**

Stylistics is defined generally as “a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language... because the various forms, patterns, and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the function of the text.” (Simpson 2). Language, hence, is the tool by which certain messages are delivered and one of the best methods of studying language to reach or to deliver such meanings is Halliday's method.

Halliday considers transitivity as a process beyond the case of whether a verb merely has a direct object or not. Halliday defines transitivity as “the name for a particular range of meaning potential—the encoding of our experience of processes” (cited in Lui 136). According to Halliday, there are three main functions of the language: 1. ideational, which is related to human experience and its theory 2. interpersonal, which is, as it suggests, personal and interactive, and 3. textual which deals with making and organizing discourse sequences and creating continuity and cohesion) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 29-30). The ideational function is divided into two components: experiential (refers to the processes themselves) and logical (refers to the relations between the processes). Halliday's precise analysis of language or more specifically, of "clause" provides a systematic way of extracting meanings associated with the structural building of language. Thus the "English clause is a composite affair, a combination of three different structures deriving from distinct functional components. These components (called 'metafunctions' in systemic theory) are the ideational (clause as representation), interpersonal (clause as exchange), and textual (clause as message)" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 309). The three components with their subdivisions work to connect what man has (spoken or written) to the real world (experience).

The transitivity system is an essential part of systemic functional grammar. In studying transitivity, three main components should be taken into consideration as important items in analyzing man's experience; "transitivity belongs to the experiential metafunction and therefore is a resource for construing our experience in terms of configurations of a process, participants and circumstances" (cited in Harbi 46). The focus here is on each figure and how they interact with each other to create meaning in a clause. Halliday in his *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2014) shows or illustrates man's experience as ‘a flow of events’ and each event is modeled as a ‘figure’ and these figures are made up of a process spreading through time, participants who are directly involved in the process, and circumstances of time, cause, manner, space and few other types which are not directly involved in the process but associated with. Applying the

linguistic order to man's different experiences and the 'flow of events' can be achieved by the grammatical system of transitivity (213).

The transitivity system is made up of several types of processes. Material type is the process of doing and happening. This type "construes a quantum of change in the flow of events as taking place through some input of energy" (224). In this type of process, there are; *Actor* (performer of the action) and *Goal* (undergoes the action). The second type is the mental process which involves man's sensing i-e man's consciousness for it involves "phenomena best described as states of mind or psychological events. Mental processes tend to be realized through the use of words like *think, know, feel, smell...* etc." (Bloor & Bloor 116). Again the subject is called *Sensor* while what is experienced is *Phenomenon*. The third type in this system is called relational. Relational clauses indicate the process of being and having. It is categorized into three main kinds; *intensive, possessive, and circumstantial* and these kinds can be categorized as; *being, attributive, and identifying*. The previous three processes are the main types as Halliday classified them in most of his books about functional grammar. In his *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2014), Halliday goes further to identify some other 'subsidiary' types as he calls them. For him these types are "located at each of the boundaries: behavioural at the boundary between material and mental, verbal at the boundary between mental and relational, and existential at the boundary between relational and material" (300). Thus, these three secondary processes are interrelated with the other principal ones. In the behavioural process, the one who is behaving is called *behave*. Verbal processes are clauses of saying and the one who produces the utterance is called *Sayer*. The process itself is *Said* while the spoken words are *Quoted* and the one who receives the words is the *Receiver*. The last process type is existential and as it is obvious from the name it indicates that something exists. Its participant is called *Existent*. (Bloor & Bloor 122-126). These major and minor processes are the base for any stylistic analysis of the grammar of any text.

## **1.2. "The School" (Background of the story)**

It's clear that both language and meaning are significant to have a remarkable piece of literature. Both of them interact to limit the frame of the work and to have a direct fulfillment for the gap that the text tries to fill. Hence determining the tone of the narrator or the mood of the story, and here absolutely through the language of the text, the text will be limited to certain language structures. Barthelme's "The School" is one of the best short stories that carries between the words of its language, meanings that can tell about both the tone and the mood of the story and hence, indirectly, about the message of the author.

Donald Barthelme (1931-1989) is an American author of short fiction. He is well known for his post-modern, surrealistic, and playful style of writing. "The School" is one

of his short fiction. The story deals with the atmosphere in the school and how the animals, plants, and eventually the children die;" the trees all died. They were orange trees. I don't know why they died, they just died. Something wrong with the soil possibly or maybe the stuff we got from the nursery wasn't the best" (Barthelme 309). The teacher discusses the matter with his pupils raising some philosophical ideas about life and death. In post-modern literature, various trends, ideas, and themes can be traced. And hence "The School" (1974) is liable to be analyzed on different levels and have different interpretations. In this study, the linguistic stylistic, particularly the transitivity system, is used to obtain themes and reveal the nature of the story.

## 2. Analysis and Discussion

Adopting the transitivity system, the story "The School" has been analyzed as the main target of the study. Clauses are deconstructed to give the meanings they carry and hence both the semantic and grammatical realizations have been under discussion since "there is no direct correlation between grammatical realizations and semantic categories," but "there is a relationship between the two, albeit a complex one" (Fontaine 221). Below are two examples from the analyzed text (more examples can be found in the Appendix):

1. And they said, is death that which gives meaning to life?

And	they	said	[[is death that which gives meaning to life?]]			
	<b>Sayer</b>	<b>Process: Verbal</b>	<b>Projected</b>			
Is	death	[[that which gives meaning to life?]]				
<b>Process: Rel. identifying</b>	<b>Identified</b>	<b>Identifier</b>				
		that	which	gives	meaning	to life
			<b>Actor</b>	<b>Pr.: Material</b>	<b>Scope</b>	<b>Recipient</b>

**Figure 2.1** Transitivity analysis of a selected clause

2. I don't know why they died,

I	don't know	[[why they died]]		
<b>Senser</b>	<b>Process: Mental: cognitive</b>	<b>Phenomenon</b>		
		[[why	they	died]]
		<b>Circumstance</b>	<b>Actor</b>	<b>Process: Material</b>

**Figure 2.2** Transitivity analysis of a selected clause

Following the tradition of systemic functional grammarians, the text was divided into separate dependent and independent clauses. As a result, 136 clauses were identified. However, the majority of these clauses contain projected and embedded clauses, each with its own process. Therefore, the text contains 209 processes which are distributed according to the six process types in the SFG transitivity system.

**Table 2.1** below displays the frequency and the percentage of the process types used in the text of “The School”. It shows that the most frequent process type is material with 62 occurrences. Clauses that have this type of process are described as “processes of doing-&-happening” by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 224). In other words, they involve physical actions. However, it is worth mentioning that 10 of those processes in the text are realized by the verb ‘die’ which does not denote much action. The material process indicates that the actions are going on in the external world and hence one can suggest that the author, Barthelme, and through the speech of the teacher shows how

death is a continuous action. The rest of the material processes concerns the teacher, the children, and a few other participants engaged in “doings-&-happenings”. It should be noted that only about half of the material processes have Goal as a participant, which indicates that a large number of these processes do not impact other participants.

<b>Process types</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Mental</b>	<b>Relational</b>	<b>Verbal</b>	<b>Existential</b>	<b>Behavioural</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Frequency</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>29.67%</b>	<b>20.57%</b>	<b>27.75%</b>	<b>12.92%</b>	<b>7.66%</b>	<b>1.43%</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 2.1:** Distribution of process types in the text

Relational and mental processes come second and third consecutively on the list. If these latter process types are further divided into their sub-categories, they are found in the frequencies shown in Tables 2.2 and 2.3 below. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), relational clauses are used “to characterize and to identify” (p. 259). Hence, the frequent use of this process type serves to represent the narrator’s view of how certain entities in the school and the world are described (in relational attributive processes) and identified (in relational identifying processes). Among the attributive sub-class, there are 13 possessive attributive processes in which the children, certain animals, and other entities are represented as being possessed by the school. Regarding the mental clauses, the sub-type of the mental processes that occurs the most is ‘cognitive’, with 25 occurrences, mainly realized by such verbs as ‘know’ (13 times) and ‘think’ (5 times). Perceptive and emotive sub-classes are also relatively widely employed. The fact that the

text relies on relational and mental processes in about half of all the processes used in the text may reveal the nature of the short story under investigation since these types of processes represent the state of mind of the participants and how the entities in the world of the story are characterized or identified by them. One of the main themes of the story is the contemplation of the inevitability of death and the fragility of life. Mental and relational processes serve that purpose very well, i.e. the contemplation of the inevitability of death. It is worth mentioning that the teacher plays the participant role of *Senser* in 19 clauses, whereas the children play the same role in 12 clauses. This could mean the teacher (the adult character) is the one who practices the process of thinking and hence encourages the children to think about the same questions about life and death, or about what is going on around them. One other salient feature of the text in these two process types is that the *Phenomena*, the *Attribute*, and *Identifier* participants are realized by clauses and abstract ideas rather than concrete characters in the story, and this aspect shows how the author tries to send his message or his view about life and death through the participants of his clauses. He employs abstract ideas to talk for him rather than concrete participants.

<b>Mental process types</b>	<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>Perceptive</b>	<b>Emotive</b>	<b>Desiderative</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Frequency</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>58.14%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>18.56%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2.2: Distribution of **Mental** process types in the text



<b>Relational process types</b>	<b>Attributive</b>	<b>Identifying</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Frequency</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2.3: Distribution of **Relational** process types in the text

Verbal processes account for 12.92% of the processes used and tend to appear heavily toward the end of the story where a conversation occurs between the teacher and his pupils, reported or sometimes directly quoted by the narrator, i.e. the teacher, mainly using the verb ‘say’. Like relational and mental processes, verbal processes in the text project a large number of clauses. They mainly serve to narrate what went on, especially in the last conversation of the story. Existential processes can be found in 16 clauses. They predominantly concern various situations and happenings as participants and it is only in one existential process that the Existent is a school entity/object. Finally, there are only three behavioural processes throughout the text.

### **3. Conclusion**

It is obvious from the analysis that the author has used all the process types in the transitivity system. Mainly he uses material processes to deal with the external world through the character of the teacher and his interaction with the students. Barthelme also uses the mental process to raise some questions about the nature of life and the inevitability of death and this gives an insight to the internal world of the “Senser”. In relational processes, the author describes the school and the children to give a picture of the atmosphere and through such descriptions, one can get an idea about the nature of the story which is pessimistic because all the living things around the students, and even the students themselves, are dying. As Systemic Functional Grammarians point out, the above-mentioned processes are the major types used throughout the text (78% of the process types in the text), similar to most English texts, while the remaining types are used less frequently. This is also the case in the current text as they comprise only about 22% of the processes in the text.

The study merely focuses on the experiential meaning which is realized by the transitivity system since including the other components of Halliday’s SFG requires

much further space and investigation, which are beyond the purposes of the current study. Future investigations of the short story, which is considered by many critics as one of the best acclaimed short stories of modern literature, may look into the other aspects from a Hallidayan point of view.

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### **Appendix: The Transitivity Analysis of the Text (Samples from the Analyzed Text)**

Before setting out to analyze the text, the following points should be made clear:

- I. The transitivity labels are included in italicized square brackets.
- II. Restored ellipited elements are included in non-italicized square brackets preceded by their labels.
- III. Embedded and projected clauses are analyzed by 'pulling them out' and indenting them directly under the original clause to which they belong.
- IV. The following abbreviations are used:
  - a. Rel. Relational
  - b. Att. = Attributive

**The Analysis:**

4. Well, we had all these children out planting trees, see,

Well, [*Carrier: possessor*] we [*Process: Rel. att. possessive*] had [*Attribute: possessed*] all these children [*Circumstance*] out planting trees, see,

[*Actor*] [the children] [*Process: Material*] planting [*Goal*] trees

5. because we figured that . . . that was part of their education, to see how you know the root systems . . . and also the sense of responsibility, taking care of things, being individually responsible.

because [*Senser*] we [*Process: Mental: cognitive*] figured that . . . [*Projection*] that was part of their education, to see how you know the root systems . . . and also the sense of responsibility, taking care of things, being individually responsible.

[*Identified*] that [*Process: Rel. identifying*] was [*Identifier*] part of their education

[*Identified*] to see how you know the root systems [*Process: Rel. identifying*]  
[was] [*Identifier*] [part of their education]

and also [*Identified*] the sense of responsibility [*Process: Rel. identifying*] [was]  
[*Identifier*] [part of their education]

[*Identified*] taking care of things [*Process: Rel. identifying*] [was] [*Identifier*][part of  
theireducation].

6. You know what I mean.

[*Senser*] You [*Process: Mental: cognitive*] know [*Phenomenon*] what I mean.

[*Phenomenon*] what [*Senser*] I [*Process: Mental: cognitive*] mean

7. And the trees all died.

And [*Actor*] the trees all [*Process: Material*] died.

8. They were orange trees.

*[Carrier]* They *[Process: Rel. attributive]* were *[Attribute]* orange trees.

9. I don't know why they died,

*[Senser]* I *[Process: Mental: cognitive]* don't know *[Phenomenon]* why they died,

*[Circumstance]* why *[Actor]* they *[Process: Material]* died

10. they just died.

*[Actor]* they just *[Process: Material]* died.

11. Something wrong with the soil possibly

*[There]* *[Process: Existential]* *[was]* *[Existent]* Something wrong with the soil possibly

12. or maybe the stuff we got from the nursery wasn't the best.

or maybe *[Carrier]* the stuff we got from the nursery *[Process: Rel. attributive]* wasn't *[Attribute]* the best.

*[Goal]* the stuff *[Actor]* we *[Process: Material]* got *[Circumstance]* from the nursery

13. We complained about it.

*[Sayer]* We *[Process: Verbal]* complained *[Circumstance]* about it.

14. So we've got thirty kids there,

So *[Carrier: possessor]* we *[Process: Rel. att. possessive]* 've got *[Attribute: possessed]* thirty kids *[Circumstance]* there,

15. each kid had his or her own little tree to plant,

*[Carrier: possessor]* each kid *[Process: Rel. att. possessive]* had *[Attribute: possessed]* his or her own little tree to plant,

*[Actor]* *[the kids]* *[Process: Material]* to plant

16. and we've got these thirty dead trees.

and *[Carrier: possessor]* we *[Process: Rel. att. possessive]* 've got *[Attribute: possessed]* these thirty dead trees.

17. All these kids looking at these little brown sticks.

*[Carrier: possessor] [We] [Process: Rel. att. possessive] [have got] [Attribute: possessed] All these kids looking at these little brown sticks.*

*[Behaver] All these kids [Process: Behavioural] looking [Circumstance] at these little brown sticks.*

18. It was depressing

*[Carrier] It [Process: Rel. attributive] was [Attribute] depressing.*

19. It wouldn't have been so bad

*[Carrier] It [Process: Rel. attributive] wouldn't have been [Attribute] so bad*

20. except that just a couple of weeks before the thing with the trees, the snakes all died.

*except that [Circumstance] just a couple of weeks before the thing with the trees, [Actor] the snakes all [Process: Material] died.*

21. But I think that the snakes—

*But [Senser] I [Process: Mental: cognitive] think [Phenomenon] that the snakes—*

22. well, the reason that the snakes kicked off was that . . . you remember, the boiler was shut off for four days because of the strike,

*well, [Identified] the reason that the snakes kicked off [Process: Rel. identifying] was [Identifier] that . . . you remember, the boiler was shut off [Circumstance] for four days because of the strike,*

*that [Actor] the snakes [Process: Material] kicked off*

*[Goal] the boiler [Process: Material] was shut off.*