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Transitivity in a learner corpus, or on how students' experiences are shaped by their semantic choices

Over the past twenty years, the study of English learner writing has experienced considerable growth in the field of applied linguistics (Polio 2003: 35, 40-41), but most such investigations have been limited to a purely formal analysis, as witnessed by the wealth of research on error analysis (Corder 1967; Richards 1980; Carl 1998; Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005). To achieve complete understanding of learners' interlanguage development, we should also consider the communicative potential of their written production, which is enabled by Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1994; henceforth, SFL). SFL's metafunctions (i.e. ideational, interpersonal and textual), formally encoded through the systems of transitivity, mood and theme, allow for a description of language that draws on experience, stance and textual organisation.

Among the few studies where Halliday's transitivity is explored, emphasis is laid on professional writing, as in Martínez (2001) or Melrose (2003). Research into learner writing has also referred to the ideational metafunction, but often either in conjunction with the other metafunctions (Ivanic and Camps 2001) or as secondary to other key topics (Chen and Foley 2004). Be that as it may, an in-depth analysis of transitivity in learner writing may lend revealing insights into the difficulties foreign students face, as they strive to make their meaning-form mappings more native-like and less L1-driven (Chen and Foley 2004: 204).

This paper focuses on the system of transitivity, which "[…] construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types" (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 170). Each of these process types has a set of associated participants and a group of circumstances. For this study, 129 argumentative compositions by 43 Spanish first year university students were retrieved from the error-annotated learner corpus NOCE (Díaz Negrillo 2007, Díaz Negrillo 2009). These texts amount to approximately 32,000 words and were collected at three different stages of the same academic year (beginning, midway and end). This article aims at:

i)Analysing the study sample on the basis of processes, participants and circumstances.

ii)Comparing the occurrence of the eight processes for any differences in use in the study sample.

iii)Assessing the students' evolution, if any, in terms of their use of transitivity patterns (processes, participants and circumstances) throughout an academic year.

iv)Exploring the influence that topic selection (given vs. free writing) may have on student's ideational perspective.

The analysis so far evidences an overall dominance of relational processes, which is in line with the findings in Chen and Foley's (2004: 193). This paper, centred on the ideational metafunction, serves to further complement two recent studies focusing on the interpersonal make-up of the NOCE corpus (Bartley and Hidalgo 2010a, Bartley and Hidalgo 2010b). With only the textual metafunction left, research based on NOCE is on its way to providing an all-embracing systemic-functional description of Spanish English learner writing.

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