



The Transitivity of the Words Related to *Coffee*

Solveiga SUŠINSKIENĖ
Šiaulių universitetas

Keywords: *coffee, transitivity, semantic functions, processes.*

Introductory observations

Being coffee lover, I like spending quite a lot of time reading reviews of coffee. While my main focus of attention is usually concerned with the assessment of coffee's taste and smell, another component of such reviews has recently attracted my interest as a linguist, namely the fact that a sizeable number of them are expressed in the form of semantic transitivity structures. The use of the semantic transitivity in reviews related to coffee raises the question of why such sentence structures should be efficient, and whether the discourse function of reviews fosters semantic transitivity expressions more generally.

Transitivity has been analyzed and defined in many different ways during the history of linguistics. Transitivity is conceived as a semantic phenomenon. Transitive sentences are sentences which describe events that involve a transfer of energy from one entity to another (from Subject to Object). For instance:

Ciro. Taste the Freshness (Ciro trademark, South Africa Advertising slogan).

The recommendation issued in the above slogan takes scope over a conceptual event frame with a *Taste* event and two participants, an implicit Agent (the consumer) and an Affected (*the Freshness* that stands for coffee). The *taste* event as such is transitive: the transfer of action from the Agent to the Affected is a forceful source of energy transfer.

This study is potentially concerned with the occurrence of meanings realized through the transitivity system. The notion of transitivity is generally perceived as a way of distinguishing between verbs according to whether they have an Object (Direct or Indirect) or not. In the present study, the term transitivity is used in a much broader sense: it refers to a system for describing the whole clause, rather than the verb and its Object. Geoff Thompson (1997, 79) argues that there are three basic questions that can be asked about any process and the clause of which it forms the nucleus:

1. What kind of process is it?
2. How many participants can/must be involved in the process?
3. What roles can/must those participants play?

To put in Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday's terms (1994, 106), the system of transitivity allows for "constru(ing) the world of experience into a manageable set of process types", and so it is through this system that a central portion of the 'experiential' metafunction is realized. The analysis of processes and participant roles is one of the most insightful ways of understanding the person's view of the world. The author producing a spoken or written text often reveals quite unconsciously his/her world-view.

Thus in the present research the notion of transitivity is seen as enabling us to refer to events that realize the process (i.e. the verb) with its associated participants (i.e. semantic roles). This paper concentrates on the brands of coffee using the data from reviews about cafes and the coffee served in them. It argues that the nature of reviews fosters semantic transitive structures. The various formal differences between the reviews are examined in terms of the relative salience of the roles played by the semantic participants and the dynamicity of the event.

The aim of the present research is twofold: to analyze the functional potential of the words related to *coffee* and what semantic roles they perform embedded in the processes. To substantiate the aim, the following objectives have been set up:

1. To overview the theory of the transitivity within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics.
2. To reveal and describe the semantic process types.
3. To analyze the transitivity of semantic participant roles performed by the words related to *coffee*.

The source of data used in this investigation is online reviews related to coffee. The study is based on a subcorpus of randomly collected reviews from the following websites: <http://www.melbournecoffeereview.com/>, <http://www.bannisterdowns.com.au/dairyounge.htm>, <http://www.beanhunter.com/cafes/review/cartel-breakwater>.

The theoretical material that I will be concerned with is described in such a way as to give an overview of the main ideas of key studies in the area rather than an exhaustive historical description of the concept of transitivity. The chapter below provides the concept of transitivity within the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) where the linguists are interested in what happens in instances produced by individuals.¹

A brief overview of theoretical prerequisites

The content of the communication is a situation, which does not refer directly to an extralinguistic reality which exists in the real world, but rather to the speaker's conceptualization of it. The components of this conceptualization of reality are semantic functions, or roles: *processes*, *participants* and *circumstances*. Lucien Tesnière (1959, 102) bases his theory on a semantic design of the sentence, describing it as a miniature drama, with the verb in a leading role, referring to

¹M. A. K. Halliday (1967, 1994) is the originator of the theory and his works will therefore be considered in particular detail.

a process, and, in addition, the participants (actants) and the circumstances. Of all the components of a situation, the most important is the process. To quote Halliday (1994, 106), “reality is made up of processes”. Within the framework of SFL, transitivity is perceived as the semantic classification of processes and/or the associated semantic roles in a clause.

The process type system is expressed in a paradigm. The process is expressed by a verb, which is core of any clause. The following types of processes are distinguished in SFL: material, happening, mental, verbal, relational, and existential (Halliday 1994; Downing, Locke 1992; Thompson 1997; Valeika 1998, VanValin, LaPolla 2002).² These six process types represent different degrees of dynamism: ranging from material processes as the most dynamic to the least dynamic – existential. The pivotal argument of the transitivity system is that our experiences of life consist of going-on, that are shared by people through clauses which constitute language they use to communicate.

The choice of process involves a particular configuration of participant roles. To put in other terms, each process is associated with different participant roles, occurring in different configurations. Randolph Quirk et al. (1985, 740) state that “by participants we understand entities realized by noun phrases, whether such entities are concrete or abstract”. For example, the realization of material process involves choosing the associated semantic roles of an Agent (obligatory), and optional participants such as Goal (Result), Affected (Patient), Range, Beneficiary, and Recipient, whereas the choice of a mental process involves the roles such as Senser and Phenomenon. Furthermore, the roles of Sayer and Verbiage are embedded in verbal process clauses and the roles of Carrier and Accompaniment function in relational processes. So, in describing the clauses as transitivity structures we have not only to describe the differences between process types, but also the associated differences in functional participant roles as well as the possible choice of circumstances.

In analyzing transitivity structure in a clause we are concerned with describing three aspects of the clause: 1) the selection of a process which is realized in verb (e.g. *Yesterday John had a cup of coffee*), 2) the selection of semantic participant roles that are realized in the nominal groups and depend on the type of process (e.g. *Yesterday John had a cup of coffee*), 3) the selection of circumstances that are expressed through adverbial groups or prepositional phrases (e.g. *Yesterday John had a cup of coffee*). Differences in process types are conceived as differences in transitivity, i.e. the transitivity of a clause is its process type (Cf. Eggins 1994, 229). Each process type is associated with certain semantic participant roles and any process type may have circumstantial elements in it. In the following chapters, we will concentrate on describing material, mental, verbal, and relational processes and their associated configurations of participant roles that are undertaken by the words related to *coffee*.

² Any semantic classification is problematic. The semantic process types cannot be either exhaustive or uncontroversial. As of today, a better classification has not been offered.

Material process clauses

Material processes are processes of “doing”. To cite Halliday (1994, 110), “They express the notion that some entity ‘does’ something – which may be done ‘to’ some other entity”. Material process clauses are those involving physical action: *running, jumping, standing up, baking*, etc. The main identification criterion for material processes is that they can be probed by asking: *What did x do?* Any material process has an Agent, even though it may not actually be mentioned in the clause (implied Agent). Agents are usually of two types: animate and inanimate or abstract entity. Consider the following examples:

(1) *When my **flat white** arrived I was overjoyed!*

(2) *Cartel is a rough diamond: it is located deep in an industrial estate and from the outside appears dated and unloved. Step inside and what a crazy and endearing place. Having said that, it is not the aesthetics that attract the masses... My latte was meaty and daring. The lovely **bitterness of the coffee** cut through the beautifully textured milk - it was intense.*

(3) ***The Colombian single origin double ristretto** left me licking my lips - stunning.*

As it has already been mentioned, Agents are prototypically animates, especially humans, and are characterized by control, volition, intentionality and force. Some inanimate entities can also have control over the action, but obviously they cannot have any intentionality. This leads to the identification of one more semantic role – Force. Consider:

(4) *After **6 coffees** I am about to jump of the walls, but had a great afternoon in Geelong with a great chance to chat to guys, check out the machinery and the awesome tea house. Overall, very eclectic and quirky and some lovely food and coffee the accompany it.*

(5) *My mate who is a coffee nut dragged me down the highway to experience these guys last weekend. BAM! Not disappointed. It was just a full on experience. More than just **my usual latte**. A flavour bomb!*

(6) *Everyone raves about these guys, but it is actually quite justified. Nothing quite **like a caffeine hit** from cartel (or a bubbacino for the kids!) :) Really special coffee, so consistent.*

(7) *This place has turned into a daily habit of mine. **Their coffee is amazing and totally addictive** - so perfectly creamy and not a bitter bean in sight!! My new favourite place.*

Other participants (i.e. semantic roles) in a ‘doing’ process are: the Affected, the Effected, and the Beneficiary. A transitive event is traditionally defined as a dynamic event where a volitionally acting Agent performs on a participant called Affected (Patient). For instance:

(8) *Firstly, had **an Ethiopian blend latte** – was an odd flavour and probably my least favourite of the day but great presentation.*

(9) ***Amazing coffee blends** roasted in house with a funky upbeat atmosphere.*

(10) *We headed to the counter with a La Cimbali sitting there all nice and shiny,*

we *ordered a flat white, latte and capo* along with the obligatory scones, jam and Bannister Downs cream (of course).

(11) <...> cannot believe this cafe is operating in an industrial estate in Breakwater, Geelong. Their skill and knowledge in roasting and preparing coffee in all forms is amazing for a country town and puts many cafes and roasters in Melbourne to shame!

(12) **Flawless coffee.** Try it filtered, try it iced, try it affogato or try it straight up – these guys have the bean, the machine and the training to impress.

(13) **Best coffee I've tasted** in New York. I tried the espresso and it was incredible. Very smooth, perfect amount of crema, **great Ethiopian blend** extracted at just the right temperature. The bar setting is great but if you need a seat, there's a big room full of couches through the doors on the side.

(14) We are very lucky to have Costa Noosa Espresso near to where we live that consistently makes coffee that never fails to satisfy. Recently we traveled to Europe through France, Spain, England and Ireland expecting to be able to make comparisons with the coffee houses of Europe. We tried and tried to find a coffee that would compare with "Costa" but were unsuccessful. We couldn't wait to get back and have our "usual" coffee from Costa Noosa.

One further participant which may occur in a material process clause is the Beneficiary. Halliday, (1967, 55) notes that this is a not usual for an 'inanimate' participant to occur as 'beneficiary' unless in a quasi-metaphorical usage. In the corpus under analysis the clauses involve two participants: the Agent and the Beneficiary that benefit from the Agent:

(15) *With the taste of my short black still lingering, I ordered a strong latte to follow which was equally impressive. Smooth creamy milk giving the punchy coffee the round consistency and full creamy mouth feel I love in milk coffees.*

(16) *As in wine, coffee gets its aromas or flavors from the soil and the climatic environment in which the coffee plant grows.*

The Effected Patient (Result) is what is traditionally called the Object of Result. Halliday (1994, 104) calls this 'creative' and the participant that results from it is called the Goal. Similarly, as proposed by Eggins (1994, 231), "the Goal is that participant at whom the process is directed, to whom the action is extended". For example:

(17) *I had found it — my little local gem! Coffee was strong, with beautifully textured milk and great example of latte art. This barista clearly knew what he was doing.*

(18) *Had to make the trip down after a few friends described their experiences here. Yeah... brilliant. The explanation of the coffee I was drinking and the passion it was served with made from an awesome coffee experience. Will venture down the highway again!*

(19) <...> by skilled and personable baristas. This place is a coffee lovers dream. **The coffee is fantastic made.**

(20) *Hervey bays, newest espresso bar, cosy friendly with great atmosphere.*

Coffee is made well with attention to detail, serving blends and single origins. Just what Hervey Bay needs.

(21) *The coffee from the good bean is consistently brewed to the highest standard and made with fine blends which the staff are happy to explain the special bean of the day. Service is great, the queues suggest one thing to me “The best coffee on the coast”. Looking forward to my next freckle!!!*

(22) *Fremantle has finally got a cafe serving great coffee at a consistent standard and has lived up to all of the good things I have heard from other worshippers of the humble bean.*

Good coffee but I think the hype that this place gets as best coffee in Australia – especially in respect to this site are somewhat unwarranted. There are some real hidden gems around the area that are so unique and produce impeccable coffees.

(23) *Each coffee was crafted with excellence!*

The examples above prove that according to the way people view the world they express themselves in particular ways, which in the transitivity system are expressed through processes.

Mental process clauses

People not always talk about the processes of doing, i.e. we not only talk what we are doing but also what we think, feel, perceive, love, etc. Halliday (1994) calls processes which encode meanings of thinking or feeling mental processes. Mental process clauses are usually associated with two participants the Senser and the Phenomenon. The Senser, who feels, thinks or perceives is animate or, as the present analysis proves, is an anthropomorphized inanimate. Consider:

(24) *Cartel coffee really do know everything there is to know about coffee, recently the roaster just traveled to Japan for the love of the bean, true passion there.*

The second participant in a mental process clause is the Phenomenon that is felt, perceived, loved, etc. by the Senser. Consider the following examples:

(25) *So I have used the beanhunter app for ages without registering, but after experiencing the coffee here, I felt the need to contribute. Like the other reviews have pressed upon, the owners here are clearly passionate about their coffee, and that's great, i don't really need to repeat that again.*

(26) *Proper Aroma/Flavor profiling is all too often neglected in Coffee. Coffee Aromas/Flavors are essential to understanding and appreciating coffee.*

(27) *This place has to be seen to be believed. smack bang in the middle of a industrial estate is the last place one would expect to find coffee of highest quality, but believe it, these guys are the real deal. <...> barista & staff were genuinely kind, knew their coffee (loved being recommended the single origin harrar from Ethiopia for my espresso and the cartel house blend for my latte) and delivered two outstanding coffees...*

(28) *I truly appreciated the free espresso shot just because you were so proud of your coffee and wanted to share the love.*

(29) *Seth at Kai asked me to trust him and recently I enjoyed my first Kai coffee without any chocolate in it. They have succeeded where every other attempt failed. Coffee mastery. Check it.*

(30) *I love the coffee that comes out of this little place!*

(31) *We lived just around the corner from this little gem and I used to fall asleep and wake up dreaming of their consistently perfect coffee. Super-friendly, uber-cool, exquisite food and perfect coffee.*

(32) *I know it can be hard to move quickly on a Friday evening but if you want fresh coffee the way it was meant to be experienced, you'd better get some hustle on!*

(33) *I have an infatuation with coffee, which started in New Zealand just over 6 years ago and I have started reviewing to share my excitement for and experience of the Melbourne coffee culture.*

As it is seen from the examples, *the coffee* may be experienced, understood, appreciated, found, known, enjoyed, loved, dreamt of, etc.

Verbal process clauses

Verbal processes are processes of *saying* and all its synonyms. A verbal process typically is associated with two participants: the Sayer and the Verbiage. The Sayer is a participant that is responsible for the verbal process itself and does not have to be a conscious participant as in the example below:

(34) *But the speed does not affect the quality: an inky short black is rich and sweet, while a **café latte** sings with flavour.*

The example above proves that a *café latte* is capable of 'putting out a signal' in the form of singing.

The Verbiage is "a nominalized statement of the verbal process: a noun expressing some kind of verbal behaviour (e.g. statement, questions, retort, answer, story)" (E g g i n s 1994, 252). To put in metaphorical terms, the word *coffee* may perform the semantic role of Verbiage as well. For example:

(35) *Everything from cold drip to syphon is available, and the staff are always happy to recommend a coffee and a brewing style which matches it best for the best experience.*

(36) *The stall with no name, run by World Barista Champion 2009 Gwilym Davies and co-staffed by some amazing baristas is a great place to visit, hang out and talk coffee.*

The last type to be discussed in the relation of transitivity is the description of relational clauses.

Relational process clauses

The category of relational clauses rests on the notion of 'being'. The process, which is generally expressed by a verb of *being*, has much less meaning than, for example, material and mental processes. Relational process clauses constitute

three categories: 1) Intensive (or Attributive) ‘x is a’ (e.g. *Coffee is perfect*), 2) Possessive ‘x has a’ (e.g. *John owns the café*), and 3) Circumstantial ‘x is at/in a’ (e.g. *Mary and John are in a café*).

An Intensive relational process involves the cohesion between two terms, where the relationship is expressed by the verb *be* or its synonym. In this type, a quality or description (Attribute) is assigned to a participant (Carrier). The semantic function of Carrier is realized by a noun or nominal group while the Attribute is realized by an adjective or nominal group. Consider the following examples:

(37) *I got to go to Melbourne last week and I couldn't help but go to a few of the top ranked places. Cartel was of course number one on my list and **the coffee was awesome**. They are a pretty busy place so I'll give them their grace for a bit of a delay, but **their coffee** was one of the trips highlights. As for the set up and atmosphere – look its not my style but it's growing on me – ill be back next trip!*

(38) *Loving this place. A coffee house in Balham that has a complete commitment to, and understanding of, how to pull the perfect shot. **The espresso is always very flavorsome with a pleasant liqourice taste to it and a nice caffeine bite**. Notably better than other coffee houses in the area.*

(39) ***My flat white** was a visual delight with silky milk, dainty artwork and rich crema showing around the rim, the blend cut through the milk and the natural sweetness of the Bannister Downs milk made for a taste sensation and well worth the trek to get here. **My wife's latte** was a visual delight in a tall tapered glass all the colours of espresso, crema, milk and foam swirled to create a kaleidoscope of colours and she commented that the blend cut through the quantity of milk nicely.*

In the examples above we recognize the process as ascription assigning the attributes. The participant roles assigned to *the coffee*, *their coffee*, *the espresso*, *My flat white*, *My wife's latte* are the Carriers realized by a noun or nominal group.

In the corpus under investigation, one case of possessive category was found, when possessive process encoded the meaning of possession between two clausal participants:

(40) *Wow! What a find! I accidentally came across this place while searching for another (incorrectly listed) in BH. I've so far had 2 flat whites over 2 says and am impressed. Well worth the visit. Lovely service, **the coffee has a lovely malty quality and quick as well**.*

As it is seen from the example, the Carrier (*the coffee*) is the possessor of the Attribute, i.e. what is possessed (*a lovely malty quality*).

Concluding remarks

This brief discussion of the reviews about coffee illustrates how transitivity patterns are the clausal realization of contextual choices. While selecting, usually undesignedly, which process type to use, and what configuration of participants to choose, the reviewers are actively selecting to represent experience in a particular way. The task of constructing the world of experience in reviews is undertaken with

the aim of expressing the attitudes as the reality of interaction and communication demands that we not only talk about something, but that we talk to someone. This semiotic phenomenon is realized through the structuring of linguistic choices for transitivity patterns.

The transitivity patterns (or structures on the level of clause) represent the encoding of experiential meanings about the surrounding world and our experience about how we perceive what is going on. The transitivity structure of a clause can be seen to opt for a process type (material, mental, verbal, and relational). The process type specifies the action, event or relationship between embedded participants or semantic roles (Agent, Affected, Effected, Beneficiary, Senser, Phenomenon, Sayer, Verbiage, Carrier, and Attribute). The analysis of transitivity involves the determining of the process type with associated participants.

By way of summing up, the transitivity patterns in reviews about coffee may be explained in that how the field of the situation is being constructed: we can describe “what is being talked about coffee” and how shifts in the clauses are achieved.

References

- Downing, Locke 1992 –Angela Downing, Philip Locke, *A University Course in English Grammar*; London: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Eggins 1994 – Suzanne Eggins, *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*, London: Pinter Publishers.
- Halliday 1994 –Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday 1967 – Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday, “Notes on Transitivity and Theme in English: Part II”, *Journal of Linguistics*, V. 3.1, 37–82.
- Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik 1985 – Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, Jan Svartvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Longman.
- Tesnière 1959 – Lucien Tesnière, *Éléments de syntaxe structurale*, Paris: Klincksieck.
- Thompson 1997 – Geoff Thompson, *Introducing Functional Grammar*, London: Arnold.
- Valeika 1998 – Laimutis Valeika, *An Introductory Course in Semantic Syntax*, Vilnius: Vilnius University Press.
- Van Valin, La Polla 2002 – Robert Van Valin, Randy La Polla, *Syntax, Structure, Meaning and Function*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sources

- <http://www.melbournecoffeereview.com/>
- <http://www.bannisterdowns.com.au/dairylounge.htm>
- <http://www.beanhunter.com/cafes/review/cartel-breakwater>

Solveiga Sušinskienė

Žodžių, siejamų leksemos *kava*, tranzityvumas

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinės sąvokos: *kava, tranzityvumas, semantiniai vaidmenys, procesai.*

Šiame straipsnyje, vadovaujantis funkcinės sisteminės lingvistikos teorija ir remiantis anglų kalbos pavyzdžiais, siekiama aptarti semantinius daiktavardžio *kava* (angl. *coffee*) vaidmenis. Remiantis šia teorija galima teigti, kad semantiniai vaidmenys priklauso nuo konkrečių ir abstrakčių daiktavardžių arba daiktavardinių frazių santykio su veiksmažodžiu. Taigi straipsnio tikslas yra išnagrinėti, kokiuose procesuose ir kokius semantinius vaidmenis atlieka žodis *kava*.

Straipsnio teiginius iliustruojantys pavyzdžiai rinkti iš tinklalapių, kuriuose kavos mėgėjai rašo atsiliepimus apie kavą, kavines, aptarnavimą etc. Tyrimui buvo pasitelkta šių tinklalapių medžiaga: <<http://www.melbournecoffeereview.com/>>, <<http://www.bannisterdowns.com.au/dairylounge.htm>>, <<http://www.beanhunter.com/cafes/review/cartel-breakwater>>. Atlikus tyrimą paaiškėjo, kad komunikacijos turinys labai priklauso nuo situacijos, nuo to, kaip kalbėtojas konceptualizuoja tikrovę. Ši konceptualizacija nusakoma semantinėmis funkcijomis (vaidmenimis): procesais, dalyviais, aplinkybėmis. Darbe ištirti ir aptarti mentaliniai, verbaliniai ir kt. procesai. Išsiaiškinta, kad daiktavardis *kava* gali atlikti šiuos semantinius vaidmenis: agento, patiento, beneficento, sakytojo, pasakymo turinio ir veiksmo atlikėjo. Tai priklauso nuo to, kaip atsiliepimą apie kavą rašantis žmogus pažįsta ir perteikia realybę.

Solveiga Sušinskienė

The Transitivity of the Words Related to *Coffee*

S u m m a r y

Keywords: *coffee, transitivity, semantic functions, processes.*

Within the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, an attempt is made to analyze the semantic roles of the words related to *coffee*. The semantic roles are assigned to nominal phrases according to the relation they hold with the process (verb). In the present research the notion of transitivity is seen as enabling us to refer to events that realize the process (i.e. the verb) with its associated participants (i.e. semantic roles). Thus the aim of the present research is twofold: to analyze the functional potential of the words related to *coffee* and what semantic roles they perform embedded in the processes.

The source of data used in this investigation is online reviews related to coffee. The study is based on a subcorpus of randomly collected reviews from the following websites: <http://www.melbournecoffeereview.com/>, <http://www.bannisterdowns.com.au/dairylounge.htm>, <http://www.beanhunter.com/cafes/review/cartel-breakwater>.

The research proved that the content of the communication is a situation, which does not refer directly to an extralinguistic reality which exists in the real world, but rather to the speaker's conceptualization of it. The components of this conceptualization of reality are semantic functions, or roles: *processes*, *participants* and *circumstances*. The transitivity structure of a clause can be seen to opt for a process type (material, mental, verbal, and relational). The process type specifies the action, event or relationship between embedded participants or semantic roles that may be performed by the words related to *coffee* (Agent, Affected, Effected, Beneficiary, Senser, Phenomenon, Sayer, Verbiage, Carrier, and Attribute).

To sum up, the transitivity patterns (or structures on the level of clause) represent the encoding of experiential meanings about the surrounding world and our experience about how we perceive what is going on.

Solveiga SUŠINSKIENĖ
Anglų filologijos katedra
Šiaulių universitetas
P. Višinskio g. 38
LT-76352 Šiauliai
[Solveigas@gmail.com]