



Exploring Agency and Ideology in Nelson Mandela's *Talking with the Enemy* through Halliday's Transitivity Framework

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ABSTRACT

Background: Political autobiographies construe agency and ideology through grammatical choices, yet studies of transitivity in Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) remain scarce relative to lexical analyses.

Objective: To examine how Mandela's transitivity patterns encode agency and ideology in "Talking with the Enemy."

Method: A qualitative case study analysed 31 purposively selected clauses using Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) three-component transitivity framework: process, participant, and circumstance. Data were manually coded and iteratively cross-checked.

Results: Relational clauses racially polarise prison facilities through opposing attributes. Mandela predominates as Sayer (8/13) and Actor (5/7), while the state is represented exclusively through existential constructions that convey passivity (e.g., "there was no response"). Direct-reported verbal processes construct a narrative arc from conflict to resolution.

Conclusion: Mandela's transitivity choices systematically foreground his agency while representing the state as discursively inert, demonstrating how grammar functions as an ideological resource in the construction of historical narratives.

Unique Contribution: The study extends previous lexically focused research (Hunjo & Ajakah, 2022) through clause-level grammatical analysis, operationalising Poynton's (2000) integration of systemic functional linguistic and cultural critique.

Key Recommendation: To assess the generalisability of these patterns beyond a single chapter, future research should extend transitivity analysis to the entire autobiography. Given the interpretive nature of qualitative SFL analysis, complementary corpus-based quantitative analyses and reader-reception studies are also recommended to investigate the extent to which the identified patterns support interpretations of ideology and influence readers' perceptions.

Keywords: Transitivity, participants, processes, autobiography, Nelson Mandela, Systemic Functional Linguistics.



INTRODUCTION

Language reflects the speaker's social identities and purposes in every act of communication. Therefore, no language use is value-free (Enyi & Nwani, 2019; Orji, 2023). In autobiographies, authors create factual narratives, but these remain inherently subjective. Effective writing, according to Enyi and Orji (2019), orients the reader towards a premeditated end. Clarity, conciseness, and lexical specificity are significantly improved in writing through strategic use of active verbs and clear subjects (Verspoor & Sauter, 2000; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The present study examines how subjects function as actors and how verbs encode process types within one of the most politically significant chapters entitled "Talking with the Enemy", in Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Mandela, 1995). Given that political conflicts are often resolved through negotiation, the chapter provides rich material for linguistic analysis of some of the significant efforts made to end apartheid in South Africa.

Several studies have examined Mandela's language using linguistic frameworks, and a review of some of them establishes the gap that the present study addresses. Poynton (2000) analyses Mandela's use of language to construct his identity and the collective identity of the anti-apartheid movement. Using early Systemic Functional Linguistics principles, she concludes that Mandela's deployment of action verbs and strategic subject selection contribute to a narrative of empowerment and solidarity. However, Poynton's work focuses more on identity construction than on systematic transitivity analysis. It neither provides granular frequency distributions of process types nor examines specific chapters for negotiation-related linguistic patterns.

Zhou (2020) explicitly applies Halliday's transitivity system to *Long Walk to Freedom*, interrogating how subcategories of transitivity are deployed to study the "meaning of freedom." Zhou's analysis reaches a controversial conclusion that "The application of transitivity system is not enough to expose Mandela's explicit purposes, let alone his implicit ideas beneath these superficial text meanings" (p. 8). Also, Zhou's analysis examines a considerable set of clauses but not specifically on the negotiation-heavy chapter "Talking with the Enemy." Therefore, to critically re-examine this conclusion regarding the explanatory power of transitivity analysis partly motivates the present study. It does so by applying systematic transitivity analysis on the selected chapter with the view of revealing both explicit purposes (for example, negotiation strategies), and implicit ideologies (such as how Mandela understands Freedom).

Hunjo and Ajakah (2022) take a different approach, exploring Michael Hoey's lexical priming theory in studying *Long Walk to Freedom*. They conclude that Mandela's linguistic choices effectively highlight the moral and ethical dimensions of his journey. Their work demonstrates that multiple linguistic frameworks can yield insights into Mandela's writing. But it does not directly address transitivity or the specific question of how grammatical choices encoded agency and ideology.

Beyond Mandela-specific studies, transitivity analysis have been widely used to examine political and autobiographical discourse. Orji (2023) applies transitivity to Nigerian newspaper headlines on terrorism, showing how choices of process types assign blame and responsibility. Enyi and Nwani (2019) use transitivity to analyse Boko Haram reporting, finding that material



and verbal processes dominated. Eggins (2004) demonstrates how transitivity reveals power relations in everyday conversation. These studies confirm that transitivity is a robust tool for revealing ideology, agency, and orientation in texts. However, no study has systematically applied transitivity analysis specifically on “Talking with the Enemy,” the chapter in which Mandela narrates the high-stakes negotiations that ended the apartheid regime in South Africa.

From the review above, three specific gaps emerge. First, a study has yet to provide a systematic, clause-by-clause transitivity analysis of “Talking with the Enemy.” Second, Zhou’s (2020) conclusion that transitivity analysis is grossly insufficient for uncovering Mandela’s implicit ideologies remains untested on a negotiation-rich chapter. Third, existing studies did not quantify subject distribution (who was the actor, sensor, or sayer) across Mandela’s narrative to demonstrate agency construction empirically. The present study addresses all three gaps.

At this point, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, this study examines only thirty-one clauses from a single chapter of *Long Walk to Freedom*. The findings may not be used to generalise the entire autobiography or to other autobiographies without further research. Second, transitivity analysis, as a grammatical framework, does not capture prosodic, multimodal, or paralinguistic features (such as tone, gesture, or facial expression), which might be relevant for spoken political discourse but are less relevant for written autobiography. Third, the analysis is limited to Halliday’s six process types and does not incorporate other SFG systems such as modality, appraisal, or theme-rheme structure, which would surely provide additional insights. Future research may expand the dataset and incorporate these complementary frameworks. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable empirical evidence regarding Mandela’s grammatical construction of agency and its implications for transitivity analysis as a method.

Given the background, gaps, and limitations stated above, this study pursues three research objectives. The first objective is to identify and categorise the subjects (participants) and verbs (processes) used by Mandela in “Talking with the Enemy.” The second objective is to examine how grammatical subjects realise different participant roles (Actor, Sensor, Sayer, Carrier, etc.) within transitivity structures to construct agency and responsibility in the narrative. The third objective is to determine whether transitivity analysis can reveal Mandela’s implicit ideological stance. These objectives correspond to these research questions. The first, what transitivity patterns (process types and participant roles) characterise Mandela’s representation of apartheid facilities and officials? This addresses the first objective. The second research question: how do these patterns construct agency and orient the reader towards Mandela’s ideological stance? This addresses the second. And the third: to what extent does transitivity analysis reveal Mandela’s implicit ideological stance in “Talking with the Enemy”?

Theoretical Framework: Transitivity in Systemic Functional Grammar

The system of transitivity, as articulated by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), constitutes the core of the ideational metafunction within systemic functional Grammar; it provides a grammatical resource for construing the world of experience into a manageable set of process types, participant roles, and circumstantial elements. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain that



“transitivity specifies the different types of process that are recognised in the language, and the structures by which they are expressed,” (p. 212). The system enables speakers to represent their inner and outer worlds systematically. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) state the following:

The six principal process types, namely material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural, and existential, each encode distinct modes of experience. Material processes construe actions and events in the external world, mental processes construe cognition, emotion, and perception, relational processes construe states of being, having, and identifying, verbal processes construe acts of saying and communicating, behavioural processes construe physiological and psychological behaviour such as breathing, laughing, and dreaming, and existential processes construe existence itself (p. 213).

Within this framework, the configuration of participants varies according to process type; material processes involve an Actor who performs the action and a Goal that is affected by it, mental processes involve a Sensor who experiences and a Phenomenon that is experienced, relational processes involve a Carrier and an Attribute for attributive clauses or a Token and a Value for identifying clauses, verbal processes involve a Sayer and optionally a Receiver and a Verbiage, and existential processes involve an Existent (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014; Eggins, 2004; Martin, 1992). Bloor and Bloor (2013) asserts that circumstantial elements, which encode meanings of time, place, manner, cause, accompaniment, role, matter, and angle, further enrich the experiential construal by situating processes within specific temporal, spatial, and causal contexts; these elements are typically realised through adverbial groups or prepositional phrases and provide critical information about the conditions under which processes occur. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) state that “circumstantial elements are not as central as participants to the transitivity structure,” [but they emphasise that] “they are nevertheless an essential component of the clause as representation,” [as they provide the] “location, extent, cause, manner, and other associated features” [that ground processes in the material world] (p. 312). Thompson (2014, p. 108) reinforces this point, stating that “circumstances are often the most informative part of the clause in terms of the experiential detail they provide,” and that the presence or absence of circumstantial elements can radically alter the perceived concreteness, feasibility, and urgency of the processes described.

The analytical power of transitivity lies in its capacity to reveal how speakers systematically foreground or background agency, attribute or obscure responsibility, and construct or elide causal relationships; these choices are never ideologically neutral, as they shape how audiences perceive the distribution of action and accountability in the represented world (Fowler, 1991; Simpson, 1993). The operationalisation of transitivity analysis for the evaluation of political preparedness requires careful attention to three specific indicators derived from the framework. First, the frequency and distribution of material processes relative to relational and mental processes provide a measure of action-oriented agency; a high proportion of material processes with explicit Actors signals a construal of governance as active intervention, whereas a predominance of relational processes may indicate a tendency toward description rather than action (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Second, the presence or absence of circumstantial



elements, particularly those of manner, extent, and cause, signal operational specificity and strategic sequencing; a speaker who embeds processes within detailed circumstances of time, place, and method projects a more concrete and feasible policy orientation than one who deploys processes without such specifications (Thompson, 2014). The secondary status of circumstantial elements in transitivity analysis, as noted by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), does not diminish their significance. According to Orji (2023), their optional nature, indeed, makes their presence particularly significant as speakers choose whether to ground their processes in specific material conditions. A speech that consistently deploys material processes without accompanying circumstances of manner or extent, for instance, may create the impression of intention without implementation, of will without mechanism, and of action without accountability. Third, the consistency or inconsistency of agentive roles across the speech indicates whether the speaker maintains a stable identity as an active protagonist or retreats into passive or possessive constructions when confronting difficult policy areas; shifts from material to mental processes, for instance, may signal rhetorical retreat from action to belief (Martin & Rose, 2007). These indicators, as employed in the present study, are grounded in the established principle that linguistic choices construe ideological positions, and that systematic patterns of transitivity reveal how speakers conceptualise their relationships to problems, solutions, and the future (Eggins, 2004; Goatly, 2000). Using verbs primarily to depict actions and characters to serve as subjects has a higher tendency of delivering precision, vividness, improved readability, clear cause-effect relationships, and emotional impact in a text (Orji, 2023). In political autobiography, these features are crucial for orienting the reader towards the author's ideological stance.

Transitivity analysis is particularly suited to autobiographical inquiry because autobiography, by its nature, involves an author narrating past events from a subjective position. The grammatical choices an autobiographer makes, including who or what is placed as subject and what type of process they are assigned, reveal how the author wishes to be perceived and how they wish events to be understood. This study, therefore, applies transitivity analysis to Mandela's text with the expectation that systematic patterns that orient the reader towards Mandela's ideological stance will emerge.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative narrative analysis examines 31 purposively selected clauses from "Talking with the Enemy" in Mandela (1995). As noted in the introduction, the limited dataset is a recognised limitation; however, it allows for an in-depth, clause-by-clause analysis. The chapter was selected because it recounts high-stakes political negotiations, intrigues, and calculated actions associated with the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa. These events provide rich linguistic material for transitivity analysis. Each clause is analysed using the three principal components of the transitivity system: process, participant, and circumstance. The analysis is organised into two thematic categories: apartheid buildings and facilities, and persons and officials.



RESULTS

Table 1: Apartheid Buildings and Facilities

Excerpt	Subject	Verb	Attribute	Process Type
1	Pollsmoor	Had	A modern face but a primitive heart	Relational–attributive
2	The buildings (prison staff)	Were	Clean and contemporary	Relational–attributive
2	The housing (prisoners)	Was	Archaic and dirty	Relational–attributive
3	The main room	Was/had	Clean, modern, rectangular; a separate section	Relational–attributive
4	Pollsmoor’s dinners	Were	Like a feast	Relational–attributive

Table compiled by Orji et al, (2026)

Finding 1: Mandela used relational clauses to describe prison facilities

White-associated spaces are assigned positive attributes, such as “modern face” and “clean and contemporary,” whereas spaces associated with Black prisoners receive negative attributes, such as “primitive heart” and “archaic and dirty.” In Excerpt 4, the attribute “like a feast” ironically highlights the prisoners’ prior deprivation. Notably, Mandela himself is absent as a subject in this section, allowing the facilities to become the focus of evaluation. These relational choices suggest that the description of prison facilities reflects the racial segregation inherent in the apartheid system.



Table 2: Persons and Officials

Excerpt	Subject	Verb	Process Type	Participant Role
5	I	Got to know	Mental–cognition	Senser
6	I	Found	Mental–cognition	Senser
7	He	Was	Relational–attributive	Carrier
8	He	Treated	Material	Actor
9	He	Would say	Verbal	Sayer
10	I	Laid out	Material	Actor
11	Professor Dash	Asked	Verbal	Sayer
12	I	Said	Verbal	Sayer
13	We	Want	Mental–affection	Senser
14	I	Told	Verbal	Sayer
15	Botha	Wanted	Mental–affection	Senser
16	I	Wrote	Material	Actor
17	I	To propose	Verbal	Sayer
18	I	Received	Material	Actor
19	I	Wrote	Material	Actor
20	I	Found	Mental–perception	Senser
21	I	Told	Verbal	Sayer
22	Coetsee	Greeted	Behavioural	Behaver
23	He	Apologised	Behavioural	Behaver
24	I	Was struck	Mental–perception	Senser
25	He	Asked	Verbal	Sayer
26	I	Responded	Verbal	Sayer
27	I	Told	Verbal	Sayer
28	I	Asked	Verbal	Sayer
29	Botha	Said	Verbal	Sayer
30	I	Told	Verbal	Sayer
31	We	Agreed	Verbal	Sayer
32	Mr. de Klerk	Poured	Material	Actor
33	I	Raised	Material	Actor

Table compiled by Orji et al, (2026)

Table 3: Characterisation of Individuals and Groups through Process Distribution

Finding 2: Verbal processes predominate, reflecting the chapter's emphasis on political discussions and negotiations. Mandela functions as Sayer in eight of the 13 verbal clauses analysed, demonstrating his active role in the negotiations. Material processes occur seven times, with Mandela functioning as Actor in five instances, underscoring his agency. Mental processes occur six times and represent cognition, desire, and perception. Existential processes occur twice, in Excerpts 18 and 19, through the expressions "there was no response" and "there was no reply." These constructions represent the government's silence rather than Mandela's actions. Their use highlights the contrast between Mandela's active participation in negotiations and the state's apparent lack of response.

Finding 3: Excerpts 26–29 are particularly significant. Mandela uses verbal processes to articulate firm negotiating conditions. In Excerpt 26, he states that "the state was responsible for the violence." In Excerpt 27, he insists that the other party must communicate to its constituents that peace requires dialogue with the African National Congress (ANC). In Excerpt 28, he requests the unconditional release of all political prisoners from Mr. Botha. These speech acts project authority and moral clarity. Furthermore, Excerpts 30 and 31 depict progress towards compromise through verbal processes: Mandela tells Mr. de Klerk how impressed he is, and both parties eventually agree on a compromise. The circumstance "in the end" provides textual closure, marking a shift from conflict to resolution.

The repeated existential constructions "there was no response" and "there was no reply" further underscore the government's silence and apparent unwillingness to engage. In contrast, Mandela's actions and negotiating contributions are generally represented through explicit participant roles and identifiable processes. This contrast reinforces the broader pattern in which Mandela is constructed as an active agent of political change, while the state is represented as comparatively unresponsive.

DISCUSSION**Relational Clauses and Racialised Space**

The relational clauses analysed in this section function as a powerful ideological instrument, grammatically mapping apartheid's racial hierarchy onto the physical landscape of the prison. Halliday and Matthiessen distinguish two primary modes of relational processes: the attributive mode, which assigns a class or quality to an entity (Carrier + Attribute), and the identifying mode, which establishes an identity between two entities (Token + Value). In Mandela's narrative, White-associated facilities are consistently represented as Carriers of positive Attributes, such as "modern face" and "clean and contemporary," while facilities associated with Black prisoners receive negative Attributes, such as "primitive heart" and "archaic and dirty."



This systematic attributive patterning does not merely describe physical spaces; it actively construes them. In Halliday's terms, language does not simply reflect experience but construes it. The relational choices thus position readers to perceive apartheid's infrastructure as emblematic of the segregationist logic it was designed to enforce. Crucially, Mandela's absence as a grammatical participant in this section allows the facilities themselves to become the focal point of evaluation. This grammatical absence is theoretically significant because, as Halliday and Matthiessen observe, relational processes are central to how speakers "relate one fragment of experience to another." The choice of which entity serves as Carrier may therefore reflect ideological priorities.

By excluding himself from these clauses, Mandela allows the spatial dichotomy to speak for itself, transforming the prison walls into silent witnesses to systemic injustice. The relational patterning thus does more than describe; it evaluates, framing apartheid's facilities as material embodiments of the racial segregation they were designed to enforce.

Process-Type Distribution and Agency

The distribution of process types reveals a discursive pattern that contrasts the representation of agency between Mandela and the apartheid state. Material processes, which Halliday and Matthiessen define as clauses of "doing and happening" concerned with the physical world, occur seven times, with Mandela functioning as Actor in five instances. This pattern grammatically constructs him as a central historical protagonist and a figure of tangible action. Although an Actor may be omitted from a material clause, Mandela's explicit participation in these processes underscores his agency in the negotiation process.

Conversely, the representation of governmental silence through existential constructions, such as "there was no response" and "there was no reply" in Excerpts 18 and 19, portrays the state as unresponsive and disengaged from dialogue. Existential processes, as Halliday and Matthiessen explain, construe experience in terms of existence or happening without necessarily assigning an Actor. Their use in this context contributes to the representation of the government as discursively inert.

This contrast in transitivity patterns is analytically significant. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) argue, the system of agency is "very generalised and affects the various process types," making process-type selection a potentially meaningful ideological choice. The findings suggest that Mandela's linguistic choices do not merely recount historical events but also construe them in ways that foreground his agency while representing the regime through absence and non-response in critical circumstances.

Mandela also serves as Sayer in eight of the 13 verbal clauses, further reinforcing his narrative centrality. Verbal processes, which Halliday and Matthiessen describe as covering "any kind of symbolic exchange," position Mandela as a principal voice driving the historical narrative forward.



Verbal Processes, Direct Speech, and the Narrative Arc

The verbal processes in Excerpts 26–31 construct a narrative arc that moves from firm negotiating positions towards a negotiated resolution. In Halliday and Matthiessen’s framework, verbal processes are clauses of saying that involve a Sayer and may include a Receiver and Verbiage. Mandela’s use of reported speech in Excerpts 26–29, including “I responded that...,” “I simply told them that...,” and “I asked Mr. Botha to...,” represents him as a principled leader who articulates firm negotiating demands.

The grammatical choices are theoretically significant because reported speech allows readers to engage with the narrated exchanges and may lend Mandela’s statements a sense of immediacy and authority. This assertive posture is subsequently followed by the collaborative process of “agreeing” in Excerpts 30–31, where the temporal circumstance “in the end” provides textual closure and signals a transition from conflict to compromise.

As Halliday and Matthiessen observe, circumstances help construe the “how, when, where, and why” of processes, anchoring them in experiential reality. The recurrence of existential clauses representing governmental silence, such as “there was no reply,” serves as a reminder of the regime’s apparent initial reluctance to engage. Meanwhile, Mandela’s actions and negotiating contributions remain anchored to identifiable participants and processes, sustaining his narrative centrality throughout the account of the negotiations.

Taken together, these linguistic choices construct a narrative in which Mandela’s voice drives the movement towards resolution, while governmental silence represents an obstacle gradually overcome through dialogue. This pattern illustrates the role of language in construing experience and shaping readers’ interpretations of historical agency and moral accountability.

Comparison with Prior Studies

The present study distinguishes itself from prior research by shifting the analytical focus from lexical choices to grammatical agency. Hunjo and Ajakah (2022), drawing on lexical priming theory, demonstrate how Mandela positively primes representations of in-group members and negatively primes those of out-group members, illuminating how he linguistically represents his world. By contrast, the present study examines how Mandela’s clause-level transitivity choices construe that world, revealing patterns in process-type distribution and participant-role assignment.

Methodologically, the study operationalises Poynton’s (2000) theoretical call for integrating systemic functional grammar (SFG) with cultural critique, translating her methodological argument into an empirical application. Whereas previous studies have addressed lexical or theoretical dimensions, the present transitivity analysis contributes a grammatical perspective on how autobiographical narratives encode agency, volition, and ideological positioning. It thereby extends the lexical and methodological foundations established in prior scholarship.



CONCLUSION

The transitivity analysis yields three principal findings. First, relational clauses systematically racialise physical space by assigning contrasting attributes to facilities associated with White people and Black prisoners, presenting apartheid's infrastructure as ideologically significant. Second, Mandela's predominance as Sayer in verbal processes and Actor in material processes constructs him as a central historical protagonist, while the state is represented as unresponsive through existential constructions such as "there was no response." Third, verbal processes in reported speech construct a narrative arc from firm negotiating positions to resolution.

Theoretically, these findings support Halliday and Matthiessen's premise that transitivity choices can carry ideological significance. They demonstrate how autobiographical grammar can do more than recount historical events: it can also construe them in ways that shape readers' interpretations of agency and moral accountability. An important gap remains in understanding readers' responses to these grammatical choices, particularly whether international and South African audiences interpret Mandela's self-representation as universally authoritative or as culturally and historically contingent.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could extend this analysis in several directions. First, a comparative transitivity analysis of Mandela's pre-presidential and post-presidential speeches could examine shifts in the construction of agency over time. Second, cross-linguistic research could investigate how translations of *Long Walk to Freedom* preserve or alter transitivity patterns across languages. Third, a reader-response study could examine how audiences from diverse cultural and political backgrounds interpret the ideological implications of the grammatical choices identified in this study. Fourth, a diachronic study could trace changes in the use of transitivity resources in South African political autobiographies from the apartheid era to the post-apartheid period.

Ethical Clearance

This study involved no human participants, animal subjects, or sensitive personal data. It is based exclusively on publicly available published textual material (*Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela, 1995). Therefore, ethical clearance was not required.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author(s)' Contributions

The corresponding author, Edwin Chiekpezie Orji conceived the study, including the design, Azubike Onwe collated the data, and both authors handled the analysis and interpretation, while Francis Nwoba arranged the initial manuscript. And all authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure

All analytical interpretations, theoretical framing, and intellectual contributions in this study are the sole responsibility of the authors. However, the authors utilise AI-assisted language tools (specifically, a large language model) for language polishing and structural formatting of the final manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data analysed in this study are derived from the published autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* (Mandela, 1995), which is publicly accessible. No primary datasets, raw transcripts, or original interview materials are generated or analysed. All data supporting the findings are contained within the primary source text and the excerpts quoted in this manuscript.

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