

Hope, Pessimism and Death: A Systemic Functional Analysis of O' Henry's *The Last Leaf*

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Abstract

*This paper aims at exploring the themes of death, hope and pessimism in the short story *The Last Leaf* written by O' Henry, using transitivity theory of language in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). In this mixed method study, the researcher takes the text of the short story and analyses transitivity processes in it. The paper offers an insight into the practical application of transitivity theory and into the ways in which the author depicts the said themes in the short story. It is found that the author has used all six transitivity processes for the depiction of the above-mentioned themes of the short story. Material processes are associated with the theme of death while mental processes are frequently used for the theme of pessimism. The use of these processes indicates the way the author exploits language to depict the themes in the short story. The study concludes that the author has used material processes in majority, followed by relational, verbal, mental, existential and behavioural processes. The results show the way various transitivity processes are used by O' Henry as techniques to structure language in the short story to elicit various functions and themes in the text.*

Keywords: *The Last Leaf, Systematic Functional Linguistics, Transitivity processes, Thematic analysis, Ideational meta-function, Death, Pessimism*

INTRODUCTION

Systemic Functional Linguistics was developed by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday in the 1960s. It is a theory centred around the notion of language function. The present research study investigates the short story *The Last Leaf* written by O' Henry (William Sydney Porter), an American short story writer. The study adopts transitivity theory of Systemic, Functional Linguistics proposed by Michael Halliday. The researcher takes three themes namely, hope, pessimism, and death from the short story and analyses it from the perspective of Transitivity theory of SFL. This study offers a general discussion of the themes of the short story, and the statistical account of various transitivity processes followed by their contribution to the incorporation of the above-mentioned themes.

In his short stories, O' Henry has depicted the lives of ordinary people of New York City. His short stories are known for abrupt beginning and surprize ending. The short story *The Last Leaf* was published in O Henry's *The Trimmed Lamp, and Other Stories of the Four Million* in 1906 (Henry, 1906). *The Last Leaf* is a story of five characters: Johnsy, Sue, Doctor and Behrman, and another personified character, Mr. Pneumonia. Johnsy and Sue are friends; both are artists, and they live together in an apartment. Johnsy catches pneumonia, and she lies on her bed in her room. She looks out of the window and sees an ivy vine on the wall. The leaves of the ivy vine fall due to wind. So, Johnsy thinks that when the last leaf falls, she will

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die. But her optimist friend, Sue, gives her hope and goes after a painter, Behrman, to paint an ivy leaf against the wall. Behrman paints such a leaf that clings to the stem of the ivy vine which looks like a natural leaf. When Johnsy wakes up the next day and sees that the last leaf is still swinging, she recovers her health. However, Behrman dies of pneumonia after painting the leaf on the wall.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was developed by Michael Halliday, a renowned English linguist, and his followers during 1960s (O'Donnell, 2012). The SFL approach is used to find out the relationship between language and its functions in social setting to attain a specific target (O'Donnell, 2012). SFL mainly focuses on the function of language. In SFL, Halliday describes three main functions of language: The Ideational metafunction which means the use of language to communicate ideas and express information; the focus is on the expression of content. Textual Metafunction is the use of language to signify discourse, and it shows text structure and connections within and out of text in the context. Interpersonal Metafunction is the language use for maintaining social relations; it shows the relationship between the addresser and the addressee.

Transitivity, according to Halliday (1985, as cited in Almurashi, 2016), is a part of the ideational function of a clause. This concept of transitivity is derived from its traditional concept of whether a verb takes direct object or not; verbs which take a direct object are called transitive verbs and those which do not take direct object are known as intransitive verbs, so Halliday developed this system in his Systemic Functional Grammar (Bustam, 2011). The function of transitivity is that of “representing ‘processes’ or ‘experiences’: actions, events, processes of consciousness and relations”. (Halliday, 1985, as cited in Almurashi, 2016). SFL is an “applicable” linguistic theory, which means that it is designed to be applied to solve problems that arise in speech communities around the world (Halliday, 1985, as cited in Almurashi, 2016). The transitivity framework is explained in the theoretical framework section of the present research in detail.

Research Objectives

1. To illustrate the way the theme of death is depicted through transitivity processes in the short story *The Last Leaf*.
2. To show the transitivity patterns used by O' Henry for the depiction of the themes of hope and pessimism in the short story.

In order to meet these two objectives, the researcher poses the following two questions:

Research Questions

1. How are transitivity processes used by O' Henry to depict the theme of death in the short story *The Last Leaf*?
2. How are the theme of hope and pessimism reflected through transitivity patterns used in the short story?

Delimitation of the Research:

First, the study is restricted only to the analysis of the themes of death, hope and pessimism in the short story. Secondly, for the analysis of the story, the researcher has applied only the theory of transitivity from the ideational metafunction of language and only the processes used in the clauses which contribute to the selected themes are analysed. Other aspects of ideational metafunction such as ergativity and the other aspects of SFL such as interpersonal and textual metafunctions do not come under the ambit of this study.

Significance of the Study:

The selected short story has been analysed from various perspectives. For example, Patel (2015) has analysed it from the perspective of psychoanalysis and Maiti (2019) has analysed it from critical evaluation perspective. It has not been analysed from the perspective of transitivity. So, the study is significant to the students and scholars of literature and linguistics in using Transitivity theory of SFL for the analysis of any piece of literature such as dramas, novels and poetry. Specifically, this study adds to the thematic understanding of the short story *The Last Leaf* through transitivity analysis by enriching readers with various techniques to structure language in particular genres to elicit various functions and themes in a text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are various ways in which texts are analysed. One of those ways is transitivity analysis of SFL. Nowadays, the SFL approach is used in almost all languages world-wide, especially in language education, and for various other purposes like discourse analysis (Almurashi, 2016). This approach is characterized as an applicable linguistic theory, which means it is designed in such a way that it has the potential to be applied to solve problems that arise in speech communities around the world. Halliday (2008, as cited in Almurashi, 2016) states that he wants to create a coherent tradition of language which will be applicable, so that it can be of benefit to large number of people who somehow engage with language in course of their work.

In SFL, Halliday (1997, as cited in Almurashi, 2016) describes three main functions of language:

1. Ideational Meta-functions: They study the way language is used to represent reality and the way one describes one's experiences of the world around oneself, as to what is going on, who is involved in the going on, and when, where, and how the things are going on. One of its chief grammatical systems is known as Transitivity.
2. Interpersonal Meta-functions: They are concerned with the interaction between the addresser and the addressee in a discourse. It is used to find out power relations - the dominance or subordination - between the addresser and the addressee in a discourse.
3. Textual Meta-functions: They are concerned with text and organization of meaning within the text that makes sense.

Using transitivity framework of SFL, a study has been conducted by Forough & Suliza (2012) on the poem *Daddy* by Sylvia Plath. The poem resonates with the private experiences and life of the poetess. By exploring the images of men in *Daddy* through a linguistic and lexico-grammatical method i.e. Transitivity, the study emphasizes on the micro elements of words which reveal the attitude and stance of the poetess towards men. Moreover, the paper explores Plath's views about men in *Daddy* through a linguistic and stylistic approach and aims to show how socially constructed meaning and linguistic structure in the poetic discourse is related: male persons are almost doer and behavior, committing acts of cruelty against women. On the other hand, the female persona is mostly associated with mental processes such as "feeling", "imagining", and "wishing" and in case of doing an action, she is shown as an unfulfilled doer who wants revenge but does not have the agency to accomplish her revenge.

Another study titled *Transitivity Analysis of A Rose for Emily*, conducted by Song (2013), adopts Transitivity theory of SFL and explains and analyses different processes in it. Then the study explains how the processes function and help depict themes and the personality of characters. Moreover, all the six processes of transitivity are analysed, and their function is shown that how Emily, the major character of the short story by William Faulkner, breaks the

constraints imposed upon her and seeks for her own happiness. So, the theme is explored through transitivity theory.

In short, Transitivity theory of SFL has been adopted and applied to several works of literature including poems, short stories and novels. In the present study, the researcher adopts this theory and applies it on *The Last Leaf* by O' Henry to analyse different processes in it and show their contribution to depicting the themes of *death*, *hope* and *pessimism*.

METHODOLOGY

Nature of the Study

The research methodology used in this study is mixed method of research i.e. it is a blend of both, qualitative and quantitative. It is quantitative because in it, the researcher has gone for the statistical and numerical measurement of the various processes used by the writer. In addition, it is qualitative because it contains thematic analysis, which is based on the qualitative understanding and interpretation of the selected text.

Data Collection

The text of the short story *The Last Leaf* has been taken from O' Henry's *The Trimmed Lamp, and Other Stories of the Four Million* (Henry, 1906). There are six types of transitivity processes which are mainly differentiated by the nature of the verb phrases. The processes (verb phrases) used in the short story have been counted manually and have been categorised into the six types. Following this, the total number of the processes was counted and then the percentage of the processes for each theme was calculated which are given in the tables in each theme section below.

Theoretical Framework

The tool that is used for the analysis of the data is Transitivity theory of SFL by Halliday. This theory is based on the traditional concept of transitive and intransitive verbs: verbs that need a direct object for giving complete sense are said to be transitive while those that do not take a direct object are known as intransitive verbs, while those that are used with or without a direct object are called ditransitive verbs, so Halliday developed this concept and termed it as Transitivity system in his theory (Bustam, 2011). There are three key elements in transitivity system: the process itself which is realized by Verbal group, the participants which are the entities or people involved in those processes, and they are often realized by nominal groups, and the circumstances which are associated with those processes. Furthermore, the processes have been divided into the following six types (Alvin, 2016):

1. Material process: its participants are *actor*, *goal*, *scope*, *recipient*, *beneficiary*, and *attribute*.
2. Relational process: its participants are either *carrier* and *attribute*, *token* and *value* or *possessor* and *possession*, depending on its subtypes namely: Relational-attributive, Relational-identifying and Relational-possessive.
3. Mental process: it is associated with cognition, perception and affection; its participants are *sensor* and *phenomenon*.
4. Verbal process: it refers to talking or speaking. Its participants are *sayer*, *verbiage* and usually *target/receiver*.
5. Behavioural: it has two participants namely the *behave* and the *behaviour*.
6. Existential process: it refers to the concept of *existing*. Its participant is *existent*.

Apart from the above processes and participants associated with them, the following *circumstances* are also included in this framework: *extent, location, manner, cause, accompaniment, matter* and *role* (Alvin, 2016). The following figure illustrates the framework:

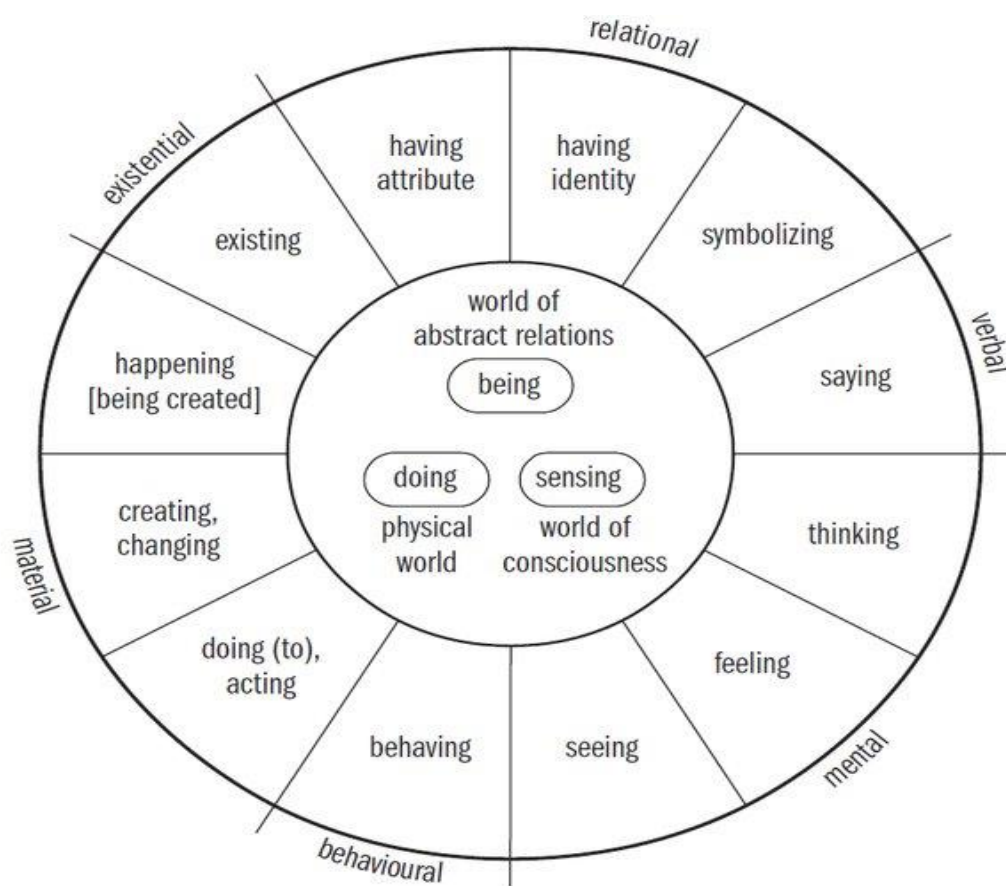


Figure 1: The grammatical system of transitivity in SFL (From Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004)

Discussion and Analysis

Themes in the Short Story *The Last Leaf* and Transitivity Processes

O' Henry has depicted many themes in the short story. It is an exploration of the journey of friendship, commitments, self-sacrifice for each other, art, *hope* and *pessimism*, and *death*. Throughout the short story, the two characters Johnsy and Sue adhere to the bond of friendship. Sue takes care of Johnsy when she suffers from pneumonia. Sue makes up her mind that whenever the last leaf of the ivy vine that hangs on the wall outside their studio falls, she will die. She gives up hope. However, Sue does not let her carry this fancy in her mind and tells her that leaves have nothing to do with her (Johnsy's) life. She gives her hope, and she is committed to taking care of her friend Johnsy. Similarly, Mr. Behrman takes care of the two friends for they are young artists and that he himself is a painter. So, he considers it his responsibility, and he sacrifices his life while painting the ivy leaf on the wall in the rain so that Sue's life can be saved: he himself dies of Pneumonia after facing harsh rain. Following is the detailed transitivity analysis of the short story's themes of *hope*, *pessimism*, and *death* as well as that of the three characters: Johnsy, Sue, and Behrman. The author uses different transitivity processes in the short story. Following is the table that shows the number and percentage of the processes used in the short story.

<i>Table No. 01: The Number of Transitivity Processes in The Short Story</i>					
Total Number of Processes: 184 (100 %)					
Material Processes	Relational Processes	Mental Processes	Verbal Processes	Behavioural Processes	Existential Processes
79	29	27	31	7	11
42.9 %	15.8 %	14.7 %	16.8 %	3.8 %	6 %

The above table no. 01 demonstrates the number of six transitivity processes used in the short story. The author uses a total of one hundred and eighty-four (184) processes out of which seventy-nine (79) are material processes, which makes 42.9 percent of all processes. Similarly, the number of relational processes is twenty-nine (29) and it covers 15.8 percent of the total processes. There are twenty-seven (27) mental processes which make 14.7 percent of the total processes. The number of verbal processes is thirty-one 31, making 16.8 percent of all the processes. In the same way, the number of behavioural processes is seven (7) and that of existential processes is eleven (11) which make 3.8 percent and 6 percent of all processes respectively. In the following subsections, the selected three themes are analysed in detail.

Theme of Hope:

The theme of *hope* has been depicted artistically. Johnsy makes up her mind that she is going to die. But the doctor, who comes for the health check-up of Johnsy, is very optimistic about her health. He reminds Sue that it is harmful for the health of Johnsy if she thinks in that way. However, he tells her that his medicine will be effective only if she changes her negative thoughts into positive ones. Later, Johnsy becomes optimistic about life, and she hopes that someday she would “paint the bay of Naples” (Henry, 1906). Mr. Behrman also frequently talks about his upcoming masterpiece. Although he has not begun painting his masterpiece, yet he hopes to paint one someday in the future. O’ Henry uses the following transitivity processes for the depiction of the theme of *Hope* in the short story.

<i>Table No. 02: Transitivity Processes for the Theme of Hope</i>					
Total Number of Transitivity Processes for the Theme of Hope: 15/184 (8.1 %)					
Material Processes	Relational Processes	Mental Processes	Verbal Processes	Behavioural Processes	Existential Processes
5	4	3	1	0	2
2.7 %	2.2 %	1.6 %	0.5 %	0 %	1.1%

Table No. 02 contains the number and percentage of processes used by the author for the depiction of the theme of hope in the short story. It shows that there are 15 processes out of 184 (which make 8.1 percent of all the processes) that contribute to the theme of *hope*. Out of these 15 processes, 5 are material processes making 2.7 percent of all the processes. The number of relational processes is 4 which makes 2.2 percent of the total processes. Similarly, there are 3 mental processes and 2 existential processes which, respectively, make 0.5 and 1.1 percent of the total number of all the processes. However, there are no behavioural processes that contribute to the theme of Hope.

As shown in table no. 02, the author of the short story uses a variety of the transitivity processes for the depiction of the theme of *hope*. Most of the processes that contribute to the theme of *hope* are material processes followed by *relational* and mental processes. Sue is the character with whom the theme of *hope* is related most of the times. She not only gives solace to Johnsy in her illness but, on the other hand, she also performs various physical actions that help Johnsy. These physical processes are indicated from the number of material processes used in the short story in the description of Johnsy and her various activities.

When Johnsy gets ill and tells Sue that with the falling of the last leaf, she will also die, Sue responds her with these words ““What (PARTICIPANT: SCOPE) have old ivy leaves (PARTICIPANT: ACTOR) to do (PROCESS: MATERIAL) with your getting well? (PARTICIPANT: SCOPE)...” (Henry, 1906, p. 201). The doctor also informs Sue that there are chances for Johnsy’s getting well if she changes her mind from negative to positive thoughts. Similarly, Sue spends all the time with Johnsy and tells her “I’d rather be here by you (VERBIAGE) said Sue (SAYER)” (Henry, 1906, p. 202). The ivy vine is seen from inside of the room through the window, so Sue (PARTICIPANT: ACTOR) pull[s] (PROCESS: MATERIAL) the shade (PARTICIPANT: GOAL) down to the window-sill (CIRCUMSTANCE: LOCATION)” so that Johnsy would not see the falling leaves, and she also takes Behrman out of the room to make Johnny’s sleep more comfortable.

In the same way, there is also the hope of old Behrman to become a successful artist. He is always “about to paint a masterpiece, but [he has not] yet begun it” (Henry, 1906, p. 203). His hope for painting a masterpiece is perpetual. “He dr[inks] gin to excess, and still talk[s] of his coming masterpiece” (Henry, 1906, p. 203). He is a ray of hope for both Sue and Johnsy. He himself is a failed artist, but he is an inspiration for both. He tells them, “Some day (CIRCUMSTANCE: TIME) I (PARTICIPANT: ACTOR) will paint (PROCESS: MATERIAL) a masterpiece (PARTICIPANT: GOAL), and we (PARTICIPANT: ACTOR) shall all go (PROCESS: MATERIAL) away (CIRCUMSTANCE: PLACE). In short, Sue and Behrman’s hopes come true: Johnsy gets well, and Behrman paints his masterpiece.

Theme of Pessimism

The theme of *pessimism* is reflected in the character of Johnsy. She suffers from pneumonia, and she lies helplessly in bed. She associates her death with the falling leaves of the ivy vine, and she thinks that when the last leaf falls, she will also die. She counts the falling leaves until the last one remains. Because of the *pessimism*, she even quits eating and her eyes are always fixed on the falling leaves of ivy vine. The author uses the following transitivity processes for the depiction of the theme of *pessimism*:

Table No. 03: Transitivity Processes for the Theme of Pessimism					
Total Number of Transitivity Processes for the Theme of Pessimism: 22/184 (12%)					
Material Processes	Relational Processes	Mental Processes	Verbal Processes	Behavioural Processes	Existential Processes
10	0	9	1	0	2
5.4%	0 %	4.9%	0.5	0 %	1.1 %

Table no. 03 shows the number of processes used for the depiction of the theme of *pessimism* in the short story. It shows that there are twenty-two (22) processes (which make 12 percent of all the processes) that contribute to the theme of *pessimism*. Out of these, ten (10) processes are material which make 5.4% of all the processes. There are nine (9) mental, one (1) verbal, and two (two) existential processes that make 4.9 percent, 0.5 percent, and 1.1 percent respectively. However, there are no relational and existential processes which add to the depiction of the theme of *pessimism*.

The theme of *pessimism* has been realized mostly with material and *verbal* processes in the short story. This theme is implied with the thought pattern of Johnsy: the way she thinks about her life is nothing but *pessimism* till the last leaf remains. The doctor tells Sue, “Your little lady (PARTICIPANT: SENSOR) has made up her mind (PROCESS: MENTAL) that she’s not going to get well (PARTICIPANT: PHENOMENON)”. Johnsy, on the other hand, has given up hope. The author uses mental processes in the utterances of Johnsy to illustrate the theme of *pessimism*: Johnsy says, “I (PARTICIPANT: SENSOR) want to see (PROCESS: MENTAL) the last one fall (PARTICIPANT: PHENOMENON)” “I’m tired of waiting,” and “I’m tired of thinking”. Despite the consolation and support of Sue and Behrman, Johnsy is not going to change her mind. Her *pessimism* is depicted in the following mental processes: “I (PARTICIPANT: SENSOR) thought (PROCESS: MENTAL) it would surely fall during the night (PARTICIPANT: PHENOMENON). I (PARTICIPANT: SENSOR) heard (PROCESS: MENTAL) the wind (PARTICIPANT: PHENOMENON). It (PARTICIPANT: ACTOR) will fall (PROCESS: MATERIAL) to-day (CIRCUMSTANCE: TIME), and I (PARTICIPANT: ACTOR) shall die (PROCESS: MATERIAL) at the same time (CIRCUMSTANCE: TIME).” However, at the end of the short story, Johnsy recovers her health.

Theme of Death

The Last Leaf illustrates the theme of *death* in a prominent way. The word ‘last’ in the very title suggests impending death. With the spread of pneumonia, the people in the neighbouring homes lie sick and eventually die. Johnsy is also attacked by pneumonia; she lies in bed all day long waiting for her death. She looks at the falling leaves of the ivy vine, and every falling leaf informs her about her impending death as she has associated her life’s end with the falling of the last leaf. Similarly, Behrman is attacked by pneumonia, but he cannot withstand it and eventually dies of it. The author of the short story uses the following transitivity processes for the incorporation of the theme of *death* in the short story:

<i>Table No. 04: Transitivity Processes for the Theme of Death</i>					
Total Number of Transitivity Processes for the Theme of Death: 12/184 (6.5 %)					
Material Processes	Relational Processes	Mental Processes	Verbal Processes	Behavioural Processes	Existential Processes
4	3	2	2	0	1
2.1 %	1.6 %	1.1 %	1.1 %	0 %	0.5%

Table no. 04 shows the quantity of the processes that encompass the theme of *death* in the short story. The theme of *death* covers 12 out of 184 transitivity processes. The table indicates that there are four (4), 2.1 percent, material processes, three (3) relational processes (making 1.6 percent of all the processes), and two (2) mental processes which make 1.1 percent of all the processes. Similarly, there are two (2) verbal and only one (1) existential processes that are 1.1 percent and 0.5 percent of all the transitivity processes, respectively. There are, however, no behavioural processes which depicts the theme of *death* in the short story.

As shown in the above table, the author has used material processes more than any other processes for reflecting the theme of *death* in the short story. Death implies inactivity or inability to perform physical actions (material processes), however, the author has manifested the theme of *death* in the activities of the characters in their lives. The following examples support this stance: when Johnsy suffers from pneumonia and Sue asks her about the chances of Johnsy's recovery, the doctor replies, "whenever my patient begins to count [PROCESS: MATERIAL] the carriages in her funeral procession, I subtract [PROCESS: MATERIAL] 50 per cent from the curative power of medicines" (Henry, 1906, p. 199).

This implies the consequential death of Johnsy unless she changes her mind. In the same way, referring to the falling leaves of the ivy vines, Johnsy utters these words in the material processes: "When (CIRCUMSTANCE: TIME) the last one (PARTICIPANT: GOAL) falls (PROCESS: MATERIAL) I (PARTICIPANT: ACTOR) must go (PROCESS: MATERIAL), too". Only one character dies of pneumonia in the short story – Mr. Behrman. His death is implied in the following *relational* process: "His shoes and clothing (PARTICIPANT: CARRIER) were (PROCESS: RELATIONAL-ATTRIBUTIVE) wet through and icy cold (PARTICIPANT: ATTRIBUTE)" and finally "Mr. Behrman (PARTICIPANT: GOAL) died (PROCESS: MATERIAL) of pneumonia (PARTICIPANT: ACTOR) to-day (CIRCUMSTANCE: TIME) in the hospital (CIRCUMSTANCE: LOCATION)" (Henry, 1906).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The author O' Henry has used all of the six transitivity processes in the short story. The theme of death has been associated with material processes performed in life. The theme of pessimism has been reflected through mental processes. Similarly, the theme of hope has been depicted using material and relational processes.

The study concludes that the author has used all the processes in the short story, but most of the material processes have been associated with the theme of *death* and mental processes have been associated with the theme of *pessimism*. For depicting the theme of hope, the author has used material processes and relational processes. The analysis indicates the way the writer's use of various techniques for depicting the selected themes and the study explored these themes through transitivity patterns.

As mentioned earlier, this study was delimited to the analysis of the transitivity processes related to the selected themes only and other aspects of the short story and other meta-functions do not come under the ambit of this study. The researcher recommends to future researchers to go for the analysis of other themes such as friendship, sacrifice, art etc., and the personalities of the characters of the short story and analyze them from the perspective of transitivity including other aspects of SFL such as Interpersonal and Textual meta-functions.

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