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# The Subjectivity and Objectivity Construction in Trade War Reports via Transitivity System

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### ABSTRACT

US president Donald Trump has accused China of unfair trading practices and intellectual property theft. Consequently, there is a trade war between America and China by means of imposing tariffs on each other's goods (BBC, 2020). As the war develops, more and more American and Chinese audiences are trying to investigate the root issue through news reports and other media channels. However, the main problem for audiences is whether or not the news reports from both American and Chinese perspectives deliver the information concerning the negotiation process objectively. Therefore, this paper aimed to investigate further into the construction of objectivity and subjectivity in related reports. In total, two reports were selected: one was from the FOX Business Network in the U.S. and the other was from the CGTN (China Global Television Network) in China. Via Michael Halliday's Transitivity System in Systemic Functional Linguistics, the frequency appearance of each process types was counted and explained (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Also, the qualitative approach was applied while scrutinizing each clause word by word. This paper discovered that Trish Regan, an American journalist, preferred to illustrate the circumstance about the trade war as if she was part of the negotiation team while Liu Xin, a Chinese anchor, focused heavily on attacking Regan personally. In addition, this study reminds viewers and journalists to be aware of the subjective language use in reports. Last but not least, it has proved the applicability of the Transitivity System in news reports analysis.

### I. INTRODUCTION

News report about the trade war is a type of hard news which is the kind of fast-paced news that usually appears on the front page of newspapers. Stories that fall under the umbrella of hard news often deal with topics, such as business, politics and international news. As a type of public broadcasting, hard news is legally charged with strict adherence to objectivity (Stroud & Reese, 2008). In this paper, the approach of analyzing the hard news: trade war is the Transitivity System. This system is developed by Michael Halliday

who is a British linguist and teacher. It breaks the whole sentence into short concise clauses and categorizes the clauses into corresponding processes: material, relational, mental, verbal, existential, and behavioural processes. The clause is a unit ranking higher than morpheme, phrases or groups and words, but lower than clause complex or sentence in lexico-grammar (Eggins, 2004).

Scholars can discover the implicit and underlying experiential meanings, the meaning of reality that is implied between the lines by analyzing discourse through the Transitivity

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system (Eggins, 2004). Some professionals have implemented the Transitivity system into news reports to discover the implied national image, or the implicit ideologies and political stance (C. F. Li, 2018; Ou, 2019). Many researchers have compared the perspectives and attitudes that different media holds (Chen, 2018; He & Liu, 2019; C. F. Li, 2018; Q. M. Li & Wu, 2018; Nie, 2018; Ou, 2019). A few professionals start to turn their focus from media stances to the objectivity feature of news reports. For example, Chenbo prudently assessed two earthquake reports in People's Daily. The result was that the report in 2013 focused more on objective truth whereas the one in 2008 used more emotional expressions, which indicates that Chinese journalists are making progress on the objectivity of reports (2018). However, literature regarding the objectivity of news reports via the Transitivity system is still scarce and inadequate, let alone the construction of objectivity and subjectivity. Therefore, this research attempted to scrutinize the trade war reports through the lens of objectivity.

In 2019, a piece of news reported by Trish Regan from the Fox Business Network in America triggered American people's hatred towards China because they think China initiated the trade war. As a response, Liu Xin, an anchor from CGTN (China Global Television Network) harshly denounced that Trish's report is all emotional without any objectivity. Obviously, there are two totally opposite reports towards the same issue: the trade war which is retaliation against other countries by raising import tariffs or placing other restrictions on other countries' imports. Which one is more subjective, which one is more objective and how do they illustrate their subjectivity or objectivity? In order to discover answers to these questions, it is very necessary to investigate their reported texts carefully by incorporating the Transitivity system. The purpose is to build the awareness of the audiences towards the objectivity of the news and also remind journalists to avoid some common mistakes of being subjective while reporting.

Based on the background presented above, this study was conducted to investigate the construction of objectivity and subjectivity in two news reported by Trish Regan from the Fox Business Network in America and Liu Xin, an anchor from CGTN (China Global

Television Network).

## II. METHOD

This paper investigated the construction of objectivity and subjectivity in two news reports from the Fox Business Network and CGTN. The channel Trish Regan Prime Time is one of the mainstream news channels on the Fox Business Network in the US. Getting to the Point is a news TV program hosted by Liu Xin on CGTN which stands for China Global Television Network. Since the trade war between America and China initiated in 2018, both of these two TV channels reported the trade war. Thus, this study was designed using a qualitative research approach.

In order to compare and contrast two parallel texts, about 300 words from two reports were excerpted as the discourses. Also, both of them were in English. As previously mentioned, one of the characteristics of the news is objectivity. Therefore, these two discourses are closely scrutinized in the paper through the Transitivity system to identify that these reports are objective or subjective and how these two anchors construct the objectivity or subjectivity. To realize this goal, two excerpts were annotated manually and the annotation results were double checked by the author's classmates and professor. Then the occurrence frequency of different types of processes was counted and the further analysis of each process was conducted by looking at the word choice, sentence structure, and so on.

According to Michael Halliday, language has three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual function. The experiential function is one type of the ideational metafunction. It is used to construe a model of experience. The Transitivity System serves to realize the experiential function. In total, there are six process types in the Transitivity System: material, relational, mental, verbal, behavioural, and existential processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Material processes are the “. . . processes of doing, usually concrete, tangible actions. . . The basic meaning of material processes is that some entity does something, undertakes some action. This is the semantic definition of material processes” (Eggins, 2004). Undoubtedly, the reports of trade war include specific actions from both the American and Chinese sides. Therefore, the more material processes in the text to describe

reactions from the two counterparts, the more objective the text is. “‘Relational’ clauses serve to characterize and to identify.” They are processes of being and having (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The reports of the trade war are interconnected with China and the United States. It is necessary for reporters to use relational processes to illustrate the relationship between these two countries. “. . . Verbal processes are processes of verbal action: saying and all its many synonyms . . .” (Eggs, 2004). In order to explain the main issue objectively, thoroughly, and clearly, reports need to contain direct speech from other official organizations, authorities, and all possible parties involved. Besides, journalists can also paraphrase the speech in her or his own words while reporting. However, comparatively, direct quotes from as many trustworthy and unbiased parties as possible in the reports are more objective than paraphrasing because it is unavoidable to add personal opinions when people paraphrase statements from others.

Mental processes are processes of sensing (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). They are “. . . about what we think or feel. Halliday calls processes which encode meanings of

thinking or feeling mental processes” (Eggs, 2004). Since the mental processes happen in the mind of people, this clause type is more subjective. Journalists should avoid frequent use of mental processes in the reports of the trade war. “Existential clauses represent that something exists or happens” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Existential processes are usually related to the “there be” sentence structure which could be used in reports to depict the background of the main issue. “Behaviourals are typically processes of physiological and psychological behaviour. For example: breathe, cough, dream...” (Eggs, 2004).

Generally, these process types coexist in one sentence. People carefully organize these different processes together to present the world that they experience. Theoretically, the Transitivity system matches the meaning that the paper attempts to address. Practically, many discourses have been scrutinized through this system (Chen, 2018; He & Liu, 2019; C. F. Li, 2018; Q. M. Li & Wu, 2018; Nie, 2018; Ou, 2019). Therefore, it is practical and effective to illustrate the construction of the two reports’ objectivity and subjectivity by applying the Transitivity system.

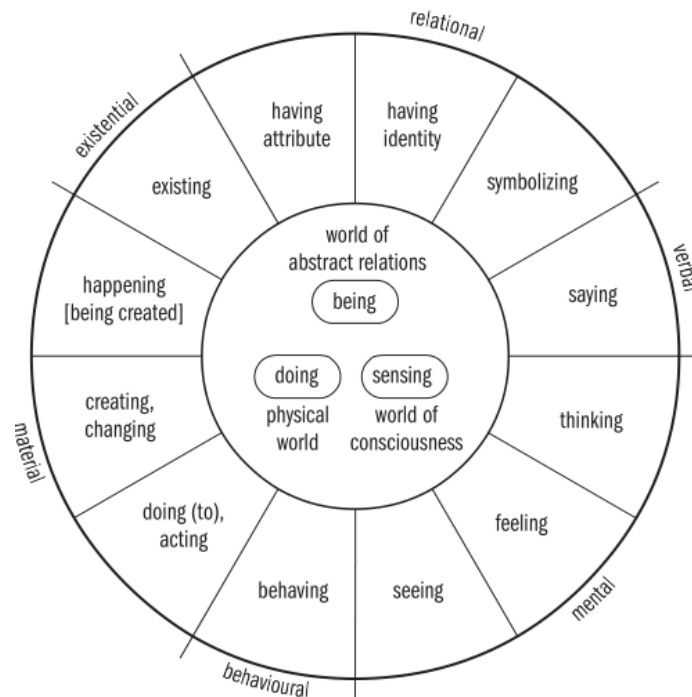


Figure 1. The grammar of experience: types of process in English. Source: An Introduction to Functional Grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014)

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This paper combines the quantitative study and the qualitative study. The quantitative approach is applied when calculating the frequency and the percentage of different process occurrences, while the qualitative

method is employed to analyze the linguistic features in every process. This study aims to identify whether the two reports are subjective or objective and how these two anchors build their objectivity or subjectivity while reporting.

**Table 1.** Process Types in Both Texts

Process type	Fox Business Network		CGTN	
	Frequency of occurrence	Percentage %	Frequency of occurrence	Percentage %
Relational process	13	40.625	15	51.724
Material process	12	37.500	9	31.034
Verbal process	4	12.500	4	12.793
Mental process	2	6.250	1	3.448
Existential process	1	3.125	0	0
Behavioural process	0	0	0	0
Total	32	100	29	100

After referring to a wide variety of research papers about the analysis of news reports via the Transitivity System, it is discovered that a relatively objective report would contain more material, relational, and verbal processes.

As can be seen from the chart,

- a) Both Fox Business Network and CGTN use the relational process most frequently, followed by the material process, verbal process, and mental process.
- b) The Fox Business Network uses the existential process once whereas the CGTN does not adopt the existential process at all.
- c) Both Fox Business Network and CGTN do not choose to implement the behavioural process.

Therefore, both of the two reports are seemingly objective from the overall number and the percentage of each process. However, after carefully scrutinizing each clause in every process, it is revealed that Trish Regan was always considering herself on behalf of all-American people. For instance, she used the word “we” which includes her and her American fellows very often. As for Liu Xin, she was targeting another reporter Trish Regan so much that she even said: “so dear Trish, perhaps you need a better research team.” In conclusion, either of the two reports is purely

objective. They added some subjective thoughts of the reporters. In the following section, how both anchors displayed their subjectivity and objectivity in their two reports via five different clause processes, except for the behavioural process will be thoroughly analyzed.

In this section, each clause is divided into several different parts, according to their process types including relational, material, verbal, mental, and existential process. Every part will be investigated carefully to reveal the construction of its subjectivity or objectivity; audiences can realize the reason why some clauses are subjective opinions; some are objective statements. Based on Li Chunfang’s research, Daily Mail once applied passive collocations and negative information in the reports to highlight the negative image of China (2018). Furthermore, Chenbo noticed that the earthquake report in 2013 focused more on objective truth whereas the one in 2008 used more emotional expressions, which indicates the reports are becoming increasingly objective (2018).

According to these two previous research articles, this paper pays more attention to the word choices in two reports, such as negative collocations, emotional phrases, and so on. Meanwhile, this thesis attempts to focus on some common mistakes of making subjective reports by conducting qualitative analysis. As previously stated, both

two reports from the Fox Business Network and CGTN incorporate more relational, material, and verbal process, which renders these trade war news coverage seemly objective. In fact, neither of them is 100% objective because of the mistakes that the two anchors make while reporting. Trish Regan is

subjective by including herself in the subject of news whereas Liu Xin set up her goal on addressing her fellow, Trish Regan, rather than focusing on the main issue, trade war. In the following analysis, we will look deep into how they make these mistakes.

### 1. Relational process

**Table 2.** Relational Process in Both Texts

	Token/Carrier	Process	Value/ Attribute
Fox Business Network	We/they	can make	
	we	Are	their No.1 customer
	they	Need	us
	we	support	their economy
	China	needs	us
	we	need	them
	The bottom line here	is	
	It	is	(the) end of the bargain
	tariffs	are	a weapon
	CGTN	We	don't really have
she		is	so sure/ indignant
it		is	all emotion and accusation
she		misidentifies	this figure
you		need	a better research team
Those		are	only their estimates
The total low-end value		may be	as high as 600 billion U.S. dollars
It		is not referring to	China/ the whole world combined

In Trish Regan’s report, she kept considering herself as the singular representative of the American population. As for Liu Xin, her main focus is not the trade war issue, but is centered around Regan instead.

In the relational process, Regan discussed both the American and Chinese perspectives, but she stated “we” or “us” six times to refer to the U.S. As a reporter, she should have removed herself from the issue that she was reporting on. However, she regarded herself as being part of one side in the trade war. So, unavoidably, her report is inscribed with her own attitude about the issue. Even more so, she blurred the lines between her role as a reporter and a person who can speak with authority about the issue on the TV channel, Fox Business Network; she even went on to state words like: “the bottom line” or “end of the bargain”, however, she is not a part of negotiating team at all. Thus, she does not have the right or ability to use these words unless those specific words are quoted from a direct authority. Furthermore, Regan used “weapon” to describe “tariffs”, which strongly shows her personal resentment towards China.

At the beginning, Liu Xin quoted

Regan’s words directly: “we don't really have a choice, but to wage this ‘war’.” Then, Liu Xin used “she” twice and “you” once to address Regan directly. Also, Liu Xin chose the word “indignant” to describe a journalist who simply has a different opinion from her. It is difficult to argue that the word “indignant” does not demonstrate Liu’s own emotional feelings. Besides, Liu Xin judged Regan’s report as “all emotion and accusation”, which implies her personal dissatisfaction towards Regan’s report. In the end, Liu even spoke to Regan directly and provided the suggestion for her: “so dear Trish, perhaps you need a better research team.” This is inappropriate during the broadcast because suggesting to Regan that she should have a better research team is not the main issue here, but is actually off-topic instead. Also, whether or not Regan should have a better research team is not Liu Xin’s objective. This statement would only function to reveal Liu Xin’s self-conceit and her disrespect towards a peer.

On the contrary, she did actually deal with the numbers objectively. "The total low-end value of the annual cost of IP theft" to the U.S. economy "may be as high as 600 billion U.S. dollars." Firstly, this statement is placed

in quotation marks, meaning this is directly from another resource and the speaker hasn't made any changes to it. Also, she pointed out that this number is just an approximation from National Bureau of Asian Research, a trustworthy authority; however, Regan misrepresented the statistic. Here is the direct words from the report: "A 2017 report of the

Commission on the Theft of American IP, produced by the National Bureau of Asian Research, a non-profit U.S. organization." As for the number "600 billion U.S. dollars", "those are only their estimates, yet to be verified independently. "Overall. It's not referring to China, but the whole world combined."

## 2. Material process

**Table 3.** Material Process in Both Texts

	Actor	Process	Goal/ range/ beneficiary
Fox Business Network	The President of the United States China the Chinese China we we	is playing, making good on continues to play around reenact Got engage in win	hardball , his threat   it retaliation that fight
CGTN	This fresh round of the tariffs We Her economic warmongering  her eyes scheming Chinese	has been enacted wage reaches  spit suckered	this war millions of Americans and possibly many others fire previous U.S. administrations

General speaking, Regan emphasized the might of the U.S. and her hostility towards China on the Fox Business Network, while Liu Xin stressed the power of China in her account. Both were telling their target audiences what they wanted to hear.

For example, when Regan mentioned the interest of the U.S., she used the words: "is playing hardball", "making good on his threat", "engage in retaliation" and "win the fight." These words do not explain the situation objectively. On the contrary, these subjective impressions imply that America is much stronger and much more powerful than China. They also suggest a presupposition that China did something wrong first and that the American action is "retaliation." When it comes to the argument that China is making, Regan used the words: "continues to play around" which is an inappropriate use of language to describe a geopolitical counterpart. She even put China in the spotlight directly by saying "got it, China?" which is disrespectful to a political partner, displays her personal bias, and threatening attitude towards China. Additionally, as I have previously stated, she never demonstrated to the public audience that she was a participating member of the negotiation team, so she does not have the authority to question China directly. This is misleading to the

viewing audience because even though she speaks with the authority, her words are fallacious and carry no consequential weight.

It seems objective that Regan used parties from both sides of the trade war, such as the President of the United States, China, and the Chinese, however, from the chart above, it is clear to see that Regan invoked the pronoun "we" twice to refer to the American viewpoint. As previously stated, in Regan's role, it is more appropriate for her to completely remove herself from the issue, yet she still regarded herself as the representative of one side in the trade war.

There is a seemingly objective clause in Regan's report: "this fresh round of the tariffs has been enacted." This material process clause delivers the information about "tariffs" but in a passive voice. As a matter of fact, her phrasing omitted the critical information of "who" enacted the tariffs. The purpose of this passive voice is to emphasize the "tariffs" rather than America as the actor. In this case, this passive voice could be supported by her other supposition that China was the actor who initiated the trade war rather than America.

Throughout Lin Xin's report, she kept her scrutinizing aim directly on Regan's report as a way to discredit the substance of Regan's argument. For the early part of Liu Xin's report, she quoted the exact words: "we don't

really have a choice” and “war”. Later, Liu described Regan’s opinion as “warmongering.” Afterwards, Liu said “her (Trish) eyes practically spit fire.” Firstly, this should be a report about the “trade war” between America and China rather than a personal issue between Regan and Liu Xin, but Liu was so centered on Regan in her report that she even used personal attack. At the same time, Liu projected her own assumptions onto Regan’s supposed implications by saying “previous U.S. administrations were somehow suckered by the scheming Chinese” rather than

using the direct speech from Regan; by doing so, Liu attempted to frame Regan’s narrative in her own way and create an image of Regan that was disingenuous. Simply put, Liu tried to put words and ideas into Regan’s mouth. Also, based on Liu’s assumption, she referenced “scheming Chinese” and “sucker” as a way to supposedly reveal the intelligence of the Chinese and the stupidity of the previous American administrations. Whether the Chinese are smart or the previous American administrations were stupid is not the focus of the trade war; but simply Liu Xin’s conjecture.

### 3. Verbal process

**Table 4.** Verbal Process in Both Texts

	Sayer	Process	Receiver
Fox Business Network	the president we/they	tells are negotiating	me
CGTN	I The report Regan she She	promise says blamed speaks portrays	you the Chinese America

From the perspective of the amount of direct speech, Regan did not utilize it at all while Liu Xin implemented it once. For example, when Regan referred to what the President told her, she paraphrased the President’s original words rather than just cite the exact words from Trump. Comparatively speaking, indirect speech is not as objective as direct speech. Again, Regan repeated the same errors in her verbal process as in the previous processes. By analyzing Regan’s language, a listener would perceive Regan herself to be part of the negotiating delegation speaking on behalf of all US citizens rather than as a separated role of a journalist. She continuously addressed the US side by referring to the pronoun “we.” Even more, she spoke with misplaced authority by saying “I promise you” directly to China. As a reporter, she clearly cannot make any promises about the issue because she is not an economist. Therefore, she does not have the competence to make the

“promise” about the “economy” in her report.

Liu Xin mentioned “the report says . . .” and quoted what was said in the report, “a 2017 report of the Commission on the Theft of American IP, produced by the National Bureau of Asian Research, a non-profit U.S. organization” and “the total low-end value of the annual cost of IP theft” to the U.S. economy “may be as high as 600 billion U.S. dollars,” which makes her report more objective. However, she chose three out of four verbal processes to discuss what Trish Regan said on her channel, but only used one verbal process to really speak in depth about the report. This is showing that she is again too focused on criticizing Trish Regan rather than emphasizing the significance of the topic. Besides, the word “blame” implies that Liu Xin personally, is not satisfied with the Regan’s word choice: “Regan blamed three times the Chinese for ‘stealing’ billions from the Americans.”

### 4. Mental process

**Table 5.** Mental Process in Both Texts

	Process	Sensor	Phenomenon
Fox Business Network	they	intend	
	they	should just remember	

Primarily, as an anchor, Regan is obligated to tell the truth rather than assume any thoughts from any other parties. So, the

“if” in the quote: “so if they intend to engage in an economic war affair” is improper here. Besides, Regan said “they should just



remember, by now, we win that fight.” But actually, Regan does not have the ability to ask the Chinese side to “remember” American diplomatic policy because she does not play any role on the negotiation team. What is

more, in this mental process, both these two clauses are referring to the Chinese side. The report would be more objective if there were mental processes from both sides.

### 5. Existential process

**Table 6.** Existential Process in Both Texts

	Process	Existent
Fox Business Network	here’s	the deal

According to the Oxford dictionary, “deal” means “an agreement entered into by two or more parties for their mutual benefit, especially in a business or political context.” Again, Trish Regan, as a journalist who is not part of the negotiation team in the trade war does not have the right and competency to negotiate a deal with the Chinese government. However, in her own report, she not only mentioned the word “deal”, but also attempted to decide the content of the “deal” by herself without any permission or citation from the official American negotiation team. This word “deal” is being used in an extremely subjective manner.

In conclusion, this paper analyses the two reports about the trade war to investigate whether or not they are objective and how they built the objectivity or subjectivity. As is shown above, neither of them is purely objective. Trish Regan did not stand out from the situation while reporting. Liu Xin’s report was too center with the other journalist rather than the issue itself.

### IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper applied the Transitivity system to analyze the subjectivity and objectivity of excerpts from two trade war news reports. The linguistic theory shows that both sides of two media sources would add their subjective viewpoints into their reports explicitly and implicitly, which only serves to distort and manipulate the narrative of the topic, the trade war. Through the quantitative approach of counting the frequency of each process type and the qualitative approach of analyzing each clause word by word, it is discovered that either of these two reports is purely subjective; they all have certain misleading information for audiences.

For viewers who chose Trish Regan’s channel as the only resource to be informed about the trade war would be misled by

Regan’s overt patriotism. They would believe that China did not keep their promise initially, which pushed America to take the next step; namely that the U.S. did not initiate this trade war. Also, viewers would come away with the message that America is mighty enough to “fight” against China and that they should support this trade war.

As for Liu Xin’s report, it is too heavily concentrated on attacking and denying Regan’s report. Liu Xin is not mainly focusing on giving an objective narrative about what is really happening between the U.S. and China in the trade war negotiation. Therefore, after the Chinese audiences and audiences all over the world watch this report, they would feel that Regan was overly emotional and unprofessional, and that what she said was all hearsay. However, they would not have a clear concept of the causes and implications of the trade war situation.

Truth is truth. Audiences deserve and have the right to know the truth. When journalists report a piece of news, they have to be committed to the reality, stand by as a third party and pay more careful attention to the languages being used in order to give audiences an unbiased truth. At the same time, viewers need to be more careful and diligent about the news they are consuming in the current era of information. They should not just take one side of any news report as the whole truth. Instead, people have to read or watch news from as many credible authorities as possible, so that the news they understand would be based on the truth. Besides, it would be more beneficial if people could analyze the news that they are consuming rather than just simply absorbing the given information. In conclusion, even though this research is only based on parts of the two reports, the detailed analysis has proven the applicability of the Transitivity system for analyzing news reports’ objectivity and subjectivity



construction. As a matter of fact, only two news discourses are focused on in this article totally, which is not sufficient enough. Therefore, maybe future research could build a small corpus of many related news reports in order to conduct a more comprehensive, objective, and persuasive study.

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