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Author	北澤, 茉奈(Kitazawa, Mana)
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Diachronic Change in Public Discourse:

A Transitivity Analysis of American Corporate Profiles

Mana KITAZAWA

1. Introduction

This paper aims to identify the types of social practices that characterize current public discourse through a chronological analysis of corporate profiles. Norman Fairclough, who developed the theory of critical discourse analysis, argued for the marketization of public discourse¹ based on the study of the discourses of the contemporary university, such as press advertisements, program materials, curriculum vitae, and prospectuses (Fairclough, 1993); however, few studies have empirically demonstrated changes in the relationship between language and social structure through quantitative and diachronic analysis. In this day and age, when everything can be easily shared publicly, it is essential to rethink what a public message is like to accurately capture contemporary language use. This study examines corporate profiles using the theory of systemic functional linguistics to elucidate how language is used in public discourse. This theory's purpose is to determine how language is used in its context (society, culture, ideology, etc.) and how language is structured for use (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). This study focuses on the ideational function of language and aims to identify what kinds of social practices can be represented by examining how the language of corporate profiles communicates their content and how these representation styles have changed.

2. Transitivity Analysis in Systemic Functional Linguistics

This paper employs the notion of transitivity (Halliday, 1967a, 1967b; Halliday, 1968) to

diachronic analysis of corporate profiles, since it is quite systematic and allows for easier comparison across documents. Among the three linguistic functions (ideational, interpersonal, textual functions) proposed by systemic functional analysis to describe the relationship between linguistic structure and social function, transitivity belongs to the ideational function as a tool for expressing one's experience. Halliday's (1967a, 1967b, 1968) transitivity theory is a grammar system that aids in translating our experience of the flow of events into a comprehensible set of process categories. In other words, a specific text is a complex of such process types that reflects the producer's interpretation of the social reality that it attempts to convey. The experiences that can be transformed into the grammatical system can be separated into two categories, namely inner and outer experiences. Actions and events are prototypes of outer experiences that are encoded as material process clauses among grammatical categories. Inner experiences that arise as a result of a reaction to the world outside are referred to as mental process clauses. Furthermore, the generalization of the relationship between experiences is projected to emerge through relational process clauses. These are the main types of processes in the English transitivity system. Still, on each boundary between 'material' and 'mental' or 'mental' and 'relational' processes, there are behavioral processes reflecting the outer representations of inner experience and the verbal processes being enacted in a word ("saying"), for example. Finally, there is an existential process that expresses existence. Halliday (1998) contended that these process types are fuzzy classifications with unclear borders, but they contribute to the representation or comprehension of our experience of the world in text. Comprehensive information on process types, based on Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 171), is shown in Table 1.

Some studies have used Halliday's transitivity analysis to analyze organizational rhetoric, including corporate annual reports and university mission statements. Kheovichai (2014) focused on transitivity analysis and modality to examine 240 adverts for academic and business jobs from the 1970s and 2010. The findings emphasized the marketization of academic employment advertisements; in the 1970s, they did not reference organizations, but in 2010, they had come to discursively create organizations in a promotional manner, with universities portrayed as service providers and being entrepreneurial. Similar findings can be found in Askehave's (2007) study of university prospectuses, which focused on rhetorical moves and transitivity, particularly actors and acts, and indicated that the institutions were

Table 1. Process Types and Their Definitions, Examples, and Participants

Process type	Explanation and Example	Participant
Material	Process of doing and happening e.g., <i>During the European scramble for Africa, Nigeria fell to the British ... and the British ruled it until 1960.</i>	Actor, Goal
Behavioral	Process of physiological and psychological behavior e.g., <u>People are laughing.</u>	Behavior
Mental	Processes of sensing e.g., <u>The Ibos did not approve of kings.</u>	Senser, Phenomenon
Verbal	Process of saying e.g., <u>Can you tell us about the political and cultural make-up of Nigeria?</u>	Sayer, Target
Relational	Process of being or having e.g., that <u>every fourth African is a Nigerian.</u>	Carrier, Attribute, Identified, Identifier, Token, Value
Existential	Process of existing e.g. so today, there's <u>Christianity</u> in the south.	Existent

Note. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) described the transitivity system as consisting of the following three parts: "a process unfolding through time, the participants involved in the process, circumstances associated with the process" (p. 175). The examples show the processes and participants underlined, the processes in bold, and the circumstances in italics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 171).

described as providers. Aib et al. (2021) used transitivity grammar theory to examine 100 corporations' mission and vision statements, demonstrating that mental and relational processes leading to developing a public image and establishing a self-concept are favored grammatical patterns in promotional messages.

As the above studies have shown, transitivity analysis is helpful for investigating an organization's interactive role and how this changes depending on what types of process are included in its statements. Furthermore, because transitivity is systematic, it facilitates quantitative research. Given that this study uses diachronic data on corporate profiles from several companies, it is expected that employing a systematic criterion such as transitivity to analyze the data will help reveal the changes in how descriptions are made over time.

3. Data and Methodology

The data consisted of corporate profiles collected from the annual reports of four companies during a 20-year period. Yearly reports were taken from Mergent Online, since Mergent, Inc.

has archived and provided business and financial information to investors for over 100 years. The companies (BestBuy [BB], World Fuel Services [WFS], American International Group [AIG], and Dow Chemical Company [DC]) were chosen because they have all been named in the Fortune 500, a list published by Fortune magazine based on annual revenues, for their respective fiscal years. Each firm now makes its annual reports public on its website (WFS since 2002, BB since 2003, AIG since 2008, and DC since 2019), and prior to doing that, it is extremely likely that the companies would deliver their printed annual reports manually to visitors at general meetings of shareholders.

Other similar statements used as data in this paper include “mission statements,” “vision statements,” “about us,” and “who we are.” These statements are often located within the first five pages of an annual report, and what is said in these statements is relatively consistent, making it easier to compare their style of description over time. Table 2 shows the data set used in this paper. Several annual reports were unavailable; however, data from at least two companies were available for each year.

Table 2. The Data Set of This Study

Corporations	Year
AIG	1998-2014, 2017
WFS	1998-2012, 2014-2021
DC	1998-2003, 2005-2015, 2019-2021
BB	1986, 1996, 1998-2004, 2008, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2021

First, the business profiles were transcribed, and all papers, segregated by year, were entered into MAXQDA, a software application for qualitative data analysis and mixed methods research. Following that, codes were created to examine and compare all the statements consistently and objectively. The initial code “year” relates to the year the statements were made public, and all documents have one of the codes attached, ranging from 1986 to 2021. Second, based on the concept of transitivity (Halliday, 1967a, 1967b; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Halliday, 1968), codes were developed to include the following six process types: material, behavioral, mental, verbal, relational, and existential. The findings of the qualitative coding process are shown in the next section.

4. Results

4.1 Process Types and their Diachronic Transformation in Corporate Profiles

First, the types of process type that are often included in corporate profiles were investigated. As indicated in Table 3, material processes that refers to doing or happening appeared more frequently (491) than any other type, followed by relational processes (300) and mental processes (117). There were few descriptions that included behavioral processes and none that included a verbal process.

Table 3: The Proportion of Process Types in Corporate Profiles

Process Type	Proportion (Token)
Material	.53 (491)
Behavioral	.00 (3)
Mental	.13 (117)
Verbal	.00 (0)
Relational	.33 (300)
Existential	.01 (9)

For example, Excerpt 5 is a comprehensive statement from 2013 that includes the three major process types. The first sentence introduces the company’s commencement by referring to the founder’s action (“established”) at the time. In this scenario, the Actor appears to be “Cornelius Vander Starr” in an individual-emphasized manner. Following the first statement, the second sentence demonstrates what the firm is today by leveraging two relational processes; the first (“traces”) describes the organization’s relationship with its former days, and the second (“is”) demonstrates that the company has developed from a tiny corporation into a global insurer. Furthermore, being a worldwide insurer, what the corporation has done for customers is explained from the perspective of the company’s employees (Actors) “serving” customers all over the world. The final statement describes what the company aspires to be. Here, the firm (“AIG”) is defined as the Senser, with the intention of “continuing to focus on” what it had done previously. Additionally, in this sentence, AIG (“it”) is a participant of “Phenomenon,” which refers to the content “known” by someone. This sentence does not mention the Senser. The final phrases introduce exactly what the organization continues to focus on, using the material process “provide” to demonstrate its activity and the relational

process “meet” to explain its products. In all the excerpts in this paper, the italicized, bold, and underlined text has been formatted by the author. Following Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2004) elements described in Table 1, verbs that are fundamental to the process type are in bold, major participants in the process type are underlined, and other process-related items are in italics in all of the instances that follow.

Excerpt 5. American International Group (2013)

In 1919, American entrepreneur Cornelius Vander Starr **established** a general insurance agency, American Asiatic Underwriters, *in a two-room office in Shanghai, China*. Ninety-five years later, AIG – which **traces its roots** *to that small Shanghai operation* – **is** a global insurer, with approximately 64,000 employees **servicing customers** *worldwide*. Today, AIG **continues to focus on** what it **has been known for throughout the years**: the ability to **provide** products and services to **meet** the diverse needs of its customers.

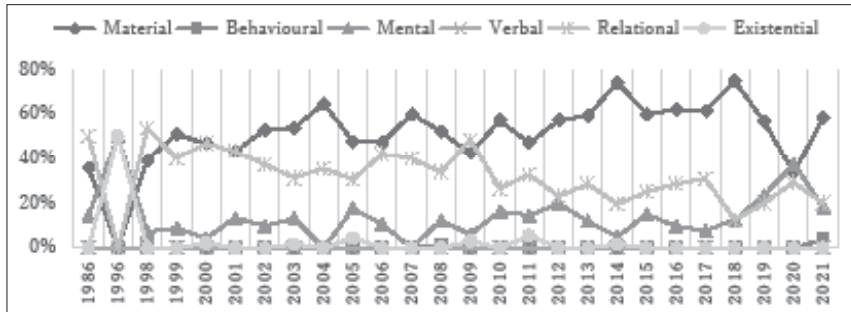
The material and relational processes emerge more frequently than any other category, as indicated in Table 3, and Excerpt 5 demonstrates the fact that the relational process appears frequently when the organization transmits background information or introduces itself. In addition, the material process is used to indicate what it has done or will do for outside stakeholders, such as consumers. The mental process also involves linkages with the world outside the firm, and by making the Senser invisible, it is assumed that the company “has been known” or acknowledged by the general public.

This paper goes on to show how the proportion of the included process types has evolved over time. Figure 1 illustrates the outcome of the code relationships between “year” and each “process type.”

Figure 1 depicts the primary three process types (material, relational, and mental) over time, as evidenced by the results in Table 3, and their combination appears to be the normal structure of corporate profiles.

Figure 1 shows the following three types of change over time: reducing the relational process, growth of the material process, and the emergence of the mental process. First, in terms of the relational process, following the largest proportion (54%) in 1998, the percent-

Figure 1. Changes in the Proportion of Each Process Type



Note. Because the number of annual reports and the length of each document vary, the percentage indicates the content rate of the process types determined based on the sum of the codes per year. As a result, this graph shows which process categories are critical each year when developing business profiles.

age typically and progressively drops. In 2018, the lowest was 13%. Apart for “serving” pertaining to the material process and “is considered” belonging to the mental process, most of the mentioned process categories are relational in Excerpt 6.

Excerpt 6. World Fuel Services (1998)

Serving over 1,100 international locations, World Fuel Services Corporation is a leading world-wide marketer of aviation and marine fueling services and a leading recycler of used oil in the United States. In fiscal 1998, revenue reached a record \$801.8 million. The Company **commands** about 1% of the worldwide market for aviation fuel and approximately 6% of the global market for marine fuel, and **is considered** a marketer of choice by the major oil companies.

A strong balance sheet **characterizes** the Company’s conservative and prudent approach to financial management.

In Excerpt 6, the relational processes reveal the company’s positioning as a “marketer/recycler” and its financial achievement record (\$801.8 million), market share (“The company commands ...”), and approach characteristics (“conservative and prudent”). In Figure 1, this identification process has generally declined, and in 2018, the rate was the lowest. On the other hand, the proportion of material process types tends to climb until 2018, with the

maximum rate (75%) occurring in the same year.

Excerpt 7 is from WFS's 2018 annual report. All of the verbs in bold refer to material processes, with the exception of "trusted," which refers to a mental process. The company appears to be an Actor, as indicated by the metonymic reference "the trusted worldwide network" and the first-person plural pronoun "we," which is more conscious of the company's members. This statement focuses on what the aim is ("optimize the critical aspects of energy, logistics and related services" and "keep the wheels of global commerce turning") and what the company does to achieve it ("providing energy solutions," "enabling global commerce," and "provide a powerful, integrated platform").

Excerpt 7. World Fuel Services (2018)

The **trusted** global network **providing** energy solutions and **enabling** global commerce.

All **working** together.

Energy Solutions

Global Network

Enabling Commerce

"We **provide** a powerful, integrated platform to **optimize** the critical aspects of energy, logistics and related services that **keep** the wheels of global commerce **turning**." Michael J. Kasbar – Chairman & CEO

Finally, although the share of mental processes is not as great as that of material and relational activities, it can be consistently seen and has recently increased. Excerpt 8 describes the mental process and "we" (the firm's members) as the Sensors, who are motivated by the purpose ("we are driven by our purpose," "together our ambition and purpose propel us," and "inspiring us"), have the desire to convey the ideal image ("seek to be,"), and feel confident in what they do ("we believe that").

Excerpt 8. Dow Chemical Company (2020)

At Dow, we **are driven** by our purpose: to **deliver** a sustainable future for the world through our materials science expertise and collaboration with our part-

*ners. That's why we **seek to be** the most innovative, customer-centric, inclusive and sustainable materials science company *in the world.* Together our ambition and purpose **propel** us forward, **inspiring** us to seek new and better solutions to **transform** our world.*

*To **be** easy, enjoyable and effective *in our interactions with our customers.**

*To **build** a culture *in which we value our differences.**

*To **embed** innovation and sustainability *in the way we work.**

Why?

*Because we **believe** that when **combined** with our science and expertise, the competitive advantage created can **be** enormous and **benefit** our customers, our company and our investors, and society as a whole.*

This section demonstrates how the proportion of the three primary process categories has evolved throughout time. Since the usage of relational processes is declining, material and mental processes are becoming more common.

4.2 Diachronic Change in Material Process Descriptions

The previous section argued that the proportion of process categories has evolved over time. This section investigates qualitatively how the qualities of material processes have altered for around 20 years.

4.2.1 Actor: Companies

The material process is associated with the process of doing or happening, and the participant in carrying out the action is referred to as the “Actor.” “Goal” refers to the change that occurs as a result of the action. In corporate profiles, it is assumed that the company is accountable for the action as the Actor, but this section indicates that the way the corporation is described and who can be considered an Actor have changed through time.

In previous years’ business profiles, the Actor was usually denoted as a collective noun using the corporate name, such as “BestBuy Co., Inc.” in Excerpt 9 and “Our company” in Excerpt 10. Shortly after the word “we” appears, it is likely to be an exclusive “we” referring to the company’s managers, excluding its employees, who are among the inner stakeholders.

The pronoun “We” in Excerpt 11 refers to individuals who manage a corporate environment so that employees can advance and does not include employees. On the other hand, the “We” in Excerpt 12 is an inclusive “we,” and it appears that all parties involved in the organization cooperate. The use of this inclusive “we” has grown in popularity in recent years.

Excerpt 9. BestBuy (1986)

Best Buy Co., Inc., **sells** nationally recognized, brand name consumer electronics and major appliances through 12 retail stores located in Minnesota, nine of which are located in the Minneapolis St. Paul market.

Excerpt 10. BestBuy (1998)

Our Company **is devoted to providing** our customers the best value on the products they want.

Excerpt 11. World Fuel Services (2002)

We will **accomplish** this by **providing** exceptional value to customers and suppliers, and **maintaining** a corporate environment that **provides** employees with opportunities for personal and professional advancement.

Excerpt 12. World Fuel Services (2017)

We **solve** energy challenges.

With our reliable supply, global logistics, and innovative technology solutions, **we deliver** when and where it matters most.

4.2.2 Actor: Other Stakeholders

In previous years, aside from the corporation itself, internal stakeholders such as employees were mentioned in the statements. Excerpts 13 and 14 refer to a specific department (“a fully staffed service department”) and subsidiaries (“the company’s subsidiaries”) as Actors that contribute to their own service.

Excerpt 13. BestBuy (1986)

A fully staffed service department **offers** factory authorized warranty service on most products.

Excerpt 14. BestBuy (2004)

The company's subsidiaries **reach** consumers through more than 750 stores in the United States and Canada.

A variety of Actors were also noticed after around 2000. As for internal stakeholders, there were remarks referring to the actions of employees all around the world, as demonstrated in Excerpt 15 (“our global team of local professionals”).

Excerpt 15. World Fuel Services (2012)

Our global team of local professionals is **committed to delivering** value with integrity and ethics to our customers, suppliers and shareholders.

External stakeholders are given the role of Actor in Excerpts 16 and 17. Excerpt 16 implores readers of the annual report in the form of the second-person pronoun (“you”) and describes them as Actors exploring the annual report. Excerpt 17, like Excerpt 16, mentions outside stakeholders (“customers”) as Actors who “select” or “buy” the company’s technology products and solutions.

Excerpt 16. Dow Chemical Company (2000)

We invite you to **explore** our 2000 Annual Report and learn how Dow is strategically leveraging science and technology to create value.

Excerpt 17. BestBuy (2014)

The way we do this is by helping customers discover, **choose, purchase, pay for, finance, activate, use, enjoy and eventually recycle** technology products and solutions.

Finally, material process clauses without an Actor have become more common in recent years. For example, in Excerpt 18, despite the act “create value,” the Actor is not defined in the sentences. The use of bullet points (see Excerpts 7, 8, and 18) has been more widespread, and this has influenced the lack of an Actor.

Excerpt 18. World Fuel Services (2021)

Create value for our business partners by delivering innovative solutions and logistics through a global team of local professionals.

4.2.3 Rise in the Use of Transformative Verb

In the material process, two types of verbs may be identified, namely creative and transformative verbs (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), and this section indicates that the latter has become more popular over time than the former.

In Excerpts 19 and 20, the verbs “make” and “write” are creative verbs and the outcomes (“the right investments” in Excerpt 19 and “property, casualty, marine life, and financial services insurance” in Excerpt 20) are created by the Actor “Dow” and “Its member companies,” respectively. The outcome would not be possible without the Actor’s process.

Excerpt 19. Dow Chemical Company (2000)

That’s why Dow is making the right investments in people, resources and technology to ensure a sound future for our stockholders, our customers, our employees and the world around us.

Excerpt 20. American International Group (1998)

Its member companies write property, casualty, marine, life and financial services insurance *in approximately 130 countries and jurisdictions*, and are engaged in a range of financial services businesses.

Yet, like “enrich”² in Excerpt 21 and “better” in Excerpt 22, there are cases in which the conclusion exists prior to the process, and the Actor’s processes, characterized as “enrich” and “better,” just change some part of it. This type of phrase is known as a transformative

clause, and its proportion in corporate profiles appears to be increasing over time. In Excerpts 21 and 22, the clauses indicate the changing of lives and the world caused by “we” as the Actor.

Excerpt 21. BestBuy (2021)

At Best Buy, our purpose is to **enrich** lives *through technology*.

Excerpt 22. Dow Chemical Company (2021)

We’re passionate about **bettering** the world and achieving our ambition.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Corporate profiles are primarily composed of three process types—material, relational, and mental—which have maintained a dominant position for the past 20 years. Each of these essentially introduces what the firm did, does, or will do; what the company is like; and what it values or how it is evaluated. The diachronic analysis is characterized by a diminishing tendency to describe the relational process, which is essential for identifying what kind of business the company is (e.g. information of size, location, products and service). However, there is an increasing trend in the depiction of material processes (e.g. the verb “serve,” “create,” and “solve”) that indicate specific actions, which seems to suggest that the promotional aspect of public discourse has become stronger than the informational aspect (Fairclough, 1993).

The diachronic analysis of corporate profiles revealed that instead of one-way communication of objective information and company qualities, descriptions are now more interactive and refer explicitly to their actions in connection to others (mainly customers and shareholders). A shift in how the company as an Actor refers to itself, from the name of the company to the first-person plural we, as well as the increasing variation in the one who takes on the position of Actor, can be attributed to these increased interactions. The shift in representational styles demonstrates that the company’s position has shifted from that of a provider to that of an equal being who engages with the other party (e.g. partners, shareholders, and employees) from the same standpoint. Nonetheless, it is probable that these

changes are not solely due to marketization. It must also be acknowledged that, in recent years, the individuality of firms as providers and actors has been diminishing most likely as a result of increased publicity. The elimination of Actor descriptions and the shift in verb quality from creative to transformative, as well as the disappearance of descriptions of the relational process that has characterized the unique information and nature of the corporation, indicates that corporate profiles are no longer used to inform and advertise externally but to provide guidance and direction internally and externally. The slight increase in the number of descriptions that contain mental processes suggests that, in addition to specific actions, awareness and willingness for them are becoming increasingly important. As a result, corporate profile descriptions have become so generalized that it may be impossible to discern which company is being mentioned merely by reading the message (see Excerpt 22).

To summarize, corporate profiles, one of the public discourses, have gone through three stages, with changes in medium and audience. Whereas in print media, material processes were represented in one-way information transmission by companies to their customers, the emergence of the internet resulted in a transition to showing actions from the same perspective as the readers. And, as the internet evolved, its interactivity faded and was replaced by attractive phrases just expressing guidelines rather than particular transmission of information.

To determine whether this trend can be generalized, however, more data must be collected to reduce variability. It is also necessary to be more aware of the changing situations surrounding corporate profiles, since the value of corporate profiles has altered over time and as a result of media changes. Instead of generalizing the descriptions of company profiles, other sections of the companies' website can become more detailed. A multimodal study that looks at photo layout, text size, and other aspects will also be necessary because people understand discourse in combination with elements other than language. Furthermore, language use in public discourse other than corporate profiles, such as advertising and media communication, should be examined.

Notes

1. Public discourse is the term used to describe the type of language used in public contexts, including networks, public spaces, and the media. Public discourse is generally produced by social entities, and the recipients are the general public (Chen, 2019).
2. Excerpt 21 only includes the first sentence of the full document, which then goes on to explain how “enrich lives” will be achieved (“We do that by leveraging our unique combination of tech expertise and human touch to meet our customers’ everyday needs, whether they come to us online, visit our stores or invite us into their homes.”). However, it is worth noting that, in contrast to the concrete instances (e.g. “provide,” “create,” and “solve”), such an abstract message is now placed at the beginning of the message.

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