The Growing Absurdity of the South African Apartheid: Transitivity in Christopher Van Wyk's 'In Detention'.

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In this essay I will analyse Christopher Van Wyk's 'In Detention' from his collection of poems *It Is Time To Go Home*. Before going into the analysis of the poem, I will consider the most appropriate framework by outlining the progression and development of transitivity analysis and its uses. I will use the chosen framework to analyse the poem and draw attention to the interaction between the text itself and the context it was written in. I will also draw on empirical corpus evidence in my analysis as it 'can usefully provide substantiation of such initial evaluations of literary works' (O'Halloran, 2007: 33). I will also evaluate the effectiveness of the chosen framework by considering the ideologies that underlie the poem and how far the framework enables me to observe them. Finally, I will analyse the appropriateness of my analysis and interpretation of the text, and if the framework fits with the theoretical surroundings the poem is rooted in.

Halliday was the forerunner in transitivity analysis. His analysis of *The Inheritors* (1971) was described by Carter and Stockwell as 'one of the groundbreaking analyses in stylistics' (2008:19). Halliday argues that Golding's 'choice of subject-matter is motivated by the deeper meaning, and the transitivity patterns realize both.' (1996 [1971]: 70) Halliday saw how grammar and particularly transitivity could convey meaning in literature. He analysed three passages from *The Inheritors* and observed the various transitive and intransitive patterns. For instance, he remarks that most of the action clauses in passage A are intransitive, and remarks that 'syntactic tension expresses this combination of activity and helplessness' in the character of Lok (1996 [1971]: 71-73). This demonstrates how Halliday used transitivity to highlight the relation of grammar and meaning.

Moreover, Halliday uses his analysis to offer his own definition for transitivity and its role as the foregrounded feature of *The Inheritors*. He argues that 'transitivity is the set of options whereby the speaker encodes his experience … Transitivity is really the cornerstone of the semantic organisation of experience' (1996 [1971]: 81). This emphasises the importance of the analysis of transitivity when the experience of a character is foregrounded in a text. In addition to this, Halliday refined the terminology and the broader applicability of transitivity in *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1985). His work developed new ways to analyse the relationship between grammar and meaning.

Halliday's work has not been free from criticism. Fish attacks the analysis calling it 'meaningless… an arbitrary act of assertion' (1996 [1981]: 100). He questions Halliday's method of analysis by focusing on the grammatical construction of a narrative. Fish argues that Halliday does not focus on what 'the reader, as he comes upon a word or pattern, is doing' (1996 [1981]: 109). Fish is incorrect to make these assumptions as Halliday clearly stresses that syntactic characteristics themselves often carry meaning. For instance in the clause 'Lok… picked up Tanakil', Halliday argues that these few examples of agency from Lok show him ineffectual because the moments belong in the past (1996 [1971]: 77). This

demonstrates how the language itself is loaded with meaning rather than, as Fish suggested, seeking meaning in what the reader is doing through the text.

However, I believe that Halliday's analysis has clear weak points. Specifically, he makes sweeping statements that are not explicitly based in the linguistic analysis. For example, he generalizes that the syntactic tension in the narrative is 'a fair summary of the life of Neanderthal man' (1996 [1971]: 73). This interpretive leap is not founded in clear evidence from the text. Therefore, using Halliday's framework for the analysis of 'In Detention' may not be appropriate because he does not make explicit the evidence for some of his interpretations.

In addition, Hoover (1999) goes further than this criticism. He argues that at some points, Halliday is wrong in his interpretation. Hoover uses corpus stylistics to analyse Halliday's interpretation of the syntactic patterning in *The Inheritors*. For instance, Hoover argues that 'it is not true that the Neanderthal world as a whole lacks cause and effect' (1999: 41) because the language is often straightforwardly transitive. Clark develops Hoover's work in this corpus approach further; he focuses on the salient inferences in *The Inheritors* (2009). However, these analyses would not aid my investigation into the transitivity of 'In Detention'. The systematic approach they adopt would be difficult to apply to the poem because of the levels of absurdity in content and syntax.

Both Kennedy (1982) and Burton (1982) analyse how transitivity relates to characterisation. Kennedy analyses the pattern of transitivity within a climactic scene in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. For example, he observes that through the meronymic agency, Mrs Verloc as the murderer is distanced from her actions: 'the actor is removed, and the instrument becomes the grammatical subject' (1982: 89). Equally, Burton focuses on the question 'who does what to whom?' (1982: 198) She takes a feminist-stylistics approach to note the various processes in the particular passage from Plath's *The Bell Jar*. For instance, she also focuses on the meronymic agency of the nurse, as a means to demonstrate the 'disenabling syntactic structures' Plath uses to produce an interaction between the events experienced and the language (1982: 201).

These analyses are effective in interpreting the relationship between the meronymic agency of each character and how that portrays a certain experience. However, this would be an unhelpful framework in an analysis of 'In Detention', purely for the reason that there is no meronymic agency in the poem. Therefore, the use of either framework would not aid a deeper understanding of the poem as a whole.

Interestingly, transitivity analysis has not been limited to literary works. Geslin's article 'Ideology in crisis on a South African Campus' includes a helpful analysis of two non-literary texts (1995). Her aim was to 'highlight the constant interaction between text and context' (1995: 193). Geslin draws from Halliday's systematic-functional grammar to observe the dialogue between a committee body and the university Dean. For instance, she highlights that 'Sipho Dlamini is the main *actor* in the material process clauses'; placing further responsibility on his actions (1995: 198). However, I believe that Geslin does not look at the implications of this interpretation within a wider context and as a result, her analysis suffers. With this in mind, because she is dealing with different texts in contrast to 'In Detention', it would be difficult to apply the framework developed to an analysis of the poem.

Simpson's chapter 'Experience in Language: Transitivity' in *Language, Ideology and Point of View* (1993) is a helpful outline of the transitivity framework. This framework seems appropriate for my analysis of 'In Detention' because he focuses on the transitive or intransitive clause as a whole. For example, he draws attention to the power of 'circumstantial elements' in a clause (1993: 90). Simpson also observes the influence of transitivity in various literary and non-literary texts. He also acknowledges that 'equating a

language form directly with a particular mind-style is problematic' (1993:113). This awareness is crucial for my analysis of the poem because the poem's explicit meaning does not directly relate to a particular mind-style. Therefore, in the analysis of 'In Detention' I will observe Simpson's approach to transitivity alongside my interpretation of the poem.

The poem 'In Detention' is part of a collection of poems by Christopher Van Wyk called *It Is Time To Go Home* published in 1979. I think it is safe to assume that this poem, along with much of Van Wyk's other poetry, is addressing the context of the apartheid and its political and social ramifications (Mzamane, 1988: 6-7).

He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He hanged himself
5   He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself while washing
He slipped from the ninth floor
He hung from the ninth floor
10   He slipped on the ninth floor while washing
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping
He hung from the ninth floor
He washed from the ninth floor while slipping
He hung from a piece of soap while washing.

(Van Wyk, 1979)

From the title 'In Detention', the poem is clearly referring to the events going on within a prison or detention centre. As the reader I am faced with a list of events that are experienced by the anonymous 'He' while 'In Detention'. Therefore, I will focus on the transitivity as it relates these various experiences.

The only transitive clause in the poem is 'He hanged himself' which is repeated three times (lines 2, 4 and 7). It is transitive because it is a goal-directed clause, where the process directly affects the goal. The clause is a material process because the verb phrase 'hanged' is a process of *doing*. The material process is an 'intention process' which implies that the actor 'He' performs the act voluntarily (Simpson, 1993:89). To breakdown the clause further to an ergative level, the 'He' in each of the transitive clauses is the *agent* (Simpson, 1993: 93). This demonstrates that significantly, these examples in 'He hanged himself' are the only instances of agency given to a participant in the poem. As the reader, I am aware that the 'He' is to hold the blame for the action 'hanged'.

However, Van Wyk's subversion of the clause is significant as he effectively reduces any agency in the character 'He'. In each transitive clause 'He hanged himself', the goal 'himself' is referring to the same man as the actor 'He'. This implies the awkward logic that the voluntary process 'hanged' is self-inflicted. Equally, it subverts any agency originally attributed to the agent. To use the ergative level of analysis in the transitive clause 'John kicked James' there is a clear agent and a clear target medium: the two participants are different people. However, in the only transitive clause both participants are the same man. The agency is completely deflated because of the self-affecting process within the transitive clause. The transitive clause only further highlights that the poem has only one explicit participant throughout.

In contrast to the transitive clauses, Van Wyk switches to an intransitive clause describing the similar processes. For instance, 'He hanged himself' (lines 2, 4, and 7) contrasted with 'He hung from…' (lines 8, 12 and 14) demonstrates the removal of the goal in the clause. This further distances any agency away from the 'He' character and draws more attention to the material process within the intransitive clause. Moreover, using an ergative analysis of the clause 'He hung…'; it breaks down to the material process being 'hung' and the medium being the 'He'. Therefore, in these examples, the agency is completely omitted. As a result, I start to question whether there is the implicit agency of another participant, perhaps a prison officer, because of the progressive deflation of explicit agency in the switch from a transitive to an intransitive clause. It reinforces Simpson's view that 'the choice whether to include or omit agency from a process constitutes an important part of message construction' (1993:94).

Indeed, Van Wyk's use of the contrasting clauses 'He hanged…' to 'He Hung' can be taken further in interpretation. In particular, the significant use of the verb form 'hung'; it is the regular past tense for the infinitive 'to hang'. This verb form is correctly used in reference to an object being attached from above but without support below: 'the picture hung on the wall'. Van Wyk uses it incorrectly to refer to the implied process of being killed by hanging, rather than using the correct past tense form 'hanged'. The form 'hung' is ambiguous because it does not explicitly imply the process of being killed by hanging; I am left to question the fate of the character because of this. Therefore, this grammatical violation combined with the transition from a transitive to an intransitive clause highlights the unsettling tone to the poem.

Additionally, the other intransitive clauses are equally important. The clauses that have 'He fell…' (lines 1, 6 and 11), 'He slipped…' (lines 3, 5, 8 and 10) and 'He washed' (line 13) are all intransitive. To use Simpson's framework, 'He washed…' would be a material-action-intention process and 'He fell' and 'He slipped' are material-action-supervention processes (1993: 89). However, these terms are dated, and Simpson admits that they are 'handy approximations' as these distinctions over intentional and accidental become difficult (1993: 90). Therefore, I will use Simpson's updated version on this area of the transitivity model by labeling the same processes 'behavioural' (2004: 23). Simpson sees the old category system as problematic because the levels of intentionality of an action will never be realized 'in the absence of full contextualization' (2004: 186).

The behavioural processes highlight the difficulty in interpreting actions of the 'He' character in the poem. What is significant however, is that 'the behaver' is distanced from the reasons behind the processes. There is clear ambiguity in the behavioural processes which gives me the opportunity for interpretation on different levels. For instance, it is unclear whether 'He fell…' is accidental or partially intentional. If it is intentional, on one level it could imply a suicide which is a common cause of death in prisons. On another level, the behavioural process could imply the 'He' was pushed, causing him to fall. This interpretation then poses the question 'who by?' which leads me back to the implicit agency and blame left on a prison guard. Either way the ambiguity behind this intransitive clause adds to the disconcerting nature of the poem. I am therefore more dependent on the circumstances describing each process to decipher the intentionality.

The circumstantial elements to each of the transitive and intransitive clauses highlight another important part to the message construction of the poem as a whole. Simpson stresses the importance of circumstances within transitivity as they 'provide extra information on the how, when, where and why of a process' (1993:90). Indeed, the prepositional phrases 'from/on the ninth floor' (lines 1, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13) and 'on/from a piece of soap' (lines 3, 5, 11, 14) are used excessively. The repetition of both these prepositional phrases alongside every intransitive clause unsettles me as the reader. The lack of diversity in the circumstances is significant as it forces me to focus on the processes experienced by the man in the poem.

This uniformity between many of the processes and circumstances makes me conscious of the construction of the poem as a whole. Therefore, I question the processes experienced and whether they are an accurate account of what goes on 'In Detention'.

Simultaneously, the same circumstantial elements are brought into question in the final lines through semantic violation (lines 11, 13 and 14). For example, 'He washed from the ninth floor'; the expected prepositional phrase would normally take '…on the ninth floor'. The switch from the expected and grammatically correct 'on' to the unexpected and ungrammatical 'from' disconcerts me. This particular line is in stark contrast to 'He slipped on the ninth floor while washing' (line 10). The reversal of verbs between the lines contributes to this unsettling affect; even though both lines are intransitive clauses, it is the circumstances behind them that cause this questioning. It plays with my expectations of what and how each line should grammatically fit together.

The growing absurdity in both content and grammar becomes more apparent by the final lines. The semantic violation is focused on the noun phrase 'a piece of soap' in both lines 11 and 14. In particular, both the intransitive clauses 'He fell from…' and 'He hung from…' are technically grammatical; but the noun phrase, 'a piece of soap' associated with both clauses demonstrate the absurd tone. Although neither process is impossible, they are at the very least, improbable. As the reader I am not left questioning the experienced events within the poem, but the process of construction of these illogical lines. The combination of the varied intransitive clauses combined with the semantic violation highlight how the circumstances within each clause draw my attention to the formation of the poem rather than what processes are taking place. It makes me conscious of a more authorial voice that purposefully constructs this absurdity in the language. Therefore, this illustrates Simpson's view that 'the linguistic structure of a text effectively encodes a particular world-view' (1993: 104).

In addition to this, Van Wyk uses another aspect in circumstantial elements to further the absurd tone. Specifically, '…while slipping/washing' is used frequently (lines 3, 5, 7, 10, 11 and 14) in the poem to add further detail to the circumstances of certain clauses. The subordinate conjunction 'while' denotes that the material or behavioural processes happen *at the same time as* 'washing' or 'slipping'. Although it implies potential causation, it signals in each of the clauses temporal contiguity (Simpson, 1993: 107). However, the grammatical violation from the use of the adverbial 'while slipping' is important. In both lines 11 and 13 the use of the non-finite progressive verb 'slipping' is grammatically incongruous. The 'while' implies that the process happens *at the same time as* the progressive 'slipping'. However, the use of the progressive 'slipping' means that the action is extended over time, which is not possible. It is the lack of possibility within the circumstances that demonstrate the absurd tone to the poem.

Moreover, the phrase is particularly awkward because of its lack of use in everyday language. Stubbs argues that 'comparative corpus methods now allow us to study how far texts consist of recurrent phrasal patterns' (2008: 241). Using the British National Corpus (B.N.C.), examples of the form 'slipping' occured 850 times, but only one took the phrase 'while slipping' thus proving the rarity of its use. The example from the B.N.C. also took the locative preposition 'into'; indeed, the most common words to follow the verb form 'slipping' are locative prepositions, such as 'into' or 'away' (see appendix). Thus, in the poem there is no revelation about the place of the process because of the lack of a locative preposition after 'while slipping'. This contributes to the vagueness of the poem by excluding this information from me. This is another instance to suggest that the poem is a list of excuses for the deaths of the prisoners.

As the reader I become increasingly aware that the poem is a work conscious of its own construction. By the final lines of the poem, this conscious authorial voice overshadows

the voice within the poem reporting each implied death of the prisoner 'He'. The absurdity of the poem highlights how the underlying authorial voice seems to be mocking the excuses for the deaths of the prisoners. This gives a helpful indication in establishing how the linguistic structure encodes a particular world-view (Simpson, 1993: 104).

However, although my analysis rooted in Simpson's framework leads to this interpretation of the poem, there is no doubt that the framework itself has weaknesses. One clear example is the ambiguity behind behavioural processes; the ambiguity in the intentionality behind 'He fell…' does have a disconcerting effect but the term 'behavioural' still does not help me decipher a clear understanding of the process. Essentially, the term 'behavioural' is still just a 'handy approximation' (1993: 90) like the previously used term material-action-supervention process. I can be fairly certain that there is implicit intentionality behind 'he fell…' and 'he slipped…' by drawing on my interpretations on other aspects of the poem. The use of Simpson's framework in this instance is not particularly helpful for giving me a more concrete understanding of the poem.

Although this is one weakness in Simpson's transitivity model, the strengths are clear to see. Firstly, using Simpson's approach to transitive and intransitive clauses helped me interpret the lack of explicit agency in the poem and thus the implicit agency placed on the prison guards. The interpretation reinforces Coetzee's view that 'it is not a poem about death but a parody of the barely serious stock of explanations that the security keep on hand for the media' (1992: 363). Moreover, another strength of Simpson's transitivity model is the focus on the circumstantial elements of transitive and intransitive clauses. The lack of diversity in the prepositional phrases, particularly, 'from/on the ninth floor' is haunting in the South African context. The circumstances echo the description the prison officers used for the deaths in John Vorster Square, an apartheid detention centre (see Anstey, 2009). Thus, by focusing on the circumstantial elements in the analysis, the interaction between the poem's text and context is clear to see.

Equally, Simpson's analysis helps me to fit the poem into a literary and theoretical context. For example, as Simpson argues, 'the linguistic structure of a text effectively encodes a particular world-view' (1993: 104); this is apparent by establishing the layered voices through the growing absurdity of the poem. It emphasises Van Wyk's aim for the poem, like many other postcolonial writers; 'to bring moral outrage and injustice to public attention' (Bethlehem, 2001: 374). In addition to this, by drawing on the transitivity and the circumstances of each clause, the framework highlighted the consciousness of construction within the poem. The analysis lays bare the meta-poetic techniques used by van Wyk. This consciousness of form is a common feature of postcolonial literature; indeed, Walder argues for the primacy of it in 'the consciousness-raising function of literature in a situation of political instability' (1998: 169). Therefore, the analysis aided my interpretation of the poem's immediate socio-political context and importantly, its theoretical and literary context.

In conclusion, this essay has investigated the use of the transitivity model and its application to a particular genre of literature and theory. I have summarized the various models, and picked the most appropriate one for the analysis. Although amendments needed to be made, Simpson's model invited different levels of interpretation, some of which were validated by the use of corpus stylistic analysis. I also evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the framework in its applicability for the analysis of 'In Detention'. Ultimately, I noted how the framework could also aid my interpretation of the poem's various contexts.

Appendix:

Collocation candidates: (top twenty results)

		Freq	T-score
p/n	**away**	66	8.091
p/n	**into**	66	7.976
p/n	**on**	49	6.269
p/n	**down**	36	5.886
p/n	**back**	29	5.251
p/n	**off**	28	5.195
p/n	**out of**	25	4.930
p/n	**through**	23	4.669
p/n	**away from**	21	4.564
p/n	**out**	17	3.849
p/n	**from**	20	3.808
p/n	**inside**	10	3.133
p/n	**past**	10	3.102
p/n	**behind**	9	2.946
p/n	**it**	19	2.920
p/n	**over**	10	2.863
p/n	**her**	12	2.827
p/n	**his**	13	2.797
p/n	**between**	9	2.778
p/n	**up**	10	2.730

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