



Transitivity and the Construction of Political Authority: A Systemic Functional Analysis of Boris Johnson's 2019 Inaugural Address

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Abstract

This study examines Boris Johnson's inaugural address delivered on 24 July 2019 through the lens of transitivity within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar. Situated at a critical stage of the Brexit process, the speech provides an analytically significant case for exploring how linguistic resources construct political authority during institutional transition. By combining quantitative analysis of process-type distribution with qualitative clause-level interpretation, this study identifies material processes as the dominant pattern, followed by relational processes, with mental, behavioural, verbal and existential processes occurring less frequently. The prominence of material clauses underscores the action-oriented nature of the address, particularly in its framing of Brexit and domestic reform. Relational and existential constructions contribute to the stabilization of political identity and institutional responsibility, while mental and verbal processes reinforce conviction and public commitment. The findings suggest that transitivity patterns are closely aligned with the communicative demands of the political moment, revealing how experiential meaning contributes to the projection of leadership, urgency and collective positioning in contemporary British political discourse.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Transitivity, Systemic Functional Grammar, Political Discourse, Brexit, Boris Johnson

1. Introduction

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union marked one of the

most consequential political developments in recent British history. Following the 2016 referendum, the Brexit process generated sustained institutional uncertainty and public debate. On 24 July 2019, Boris Johnson assumed office as Prime Minister and delivered his inaugural address at a critical juncture in this process. The speech was given amid parliamentary deadlock and heightened expectations for decisive leadership. Unlike routine transfers of power, this inaugural address was delivered in the context of prolonged political impasse, making it a particularly significant case for examining how political authority is discursively constructed during periods of transition.

Inaugural addresses serve not merely ceremonial purposes; they function as strategic discourses through which newly appointed leaders outline priorities, frame national challenges, and project governing philosophies. As the first Prime Minister to take office during the decisive phase of Brexit implementation, Johnson faced immediate pressure to articulate direction, restore confidence, and mobilize public support. His inaugural speech therefore provides an analytically valuable site for investigating how linguistic choices encode urgency, determination, and collective positioning.

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), developed by M. A. K. Halliday, offers a functional framework for exploring how language constructs social meaning. Central to SFG is the transitivity system, which examines how experience is represented through process types, participants, and circumstances. Rather than treating grammar as a formal system in isolation, transitivity analysis investigates how speakers construe events, assign agency, and shape representations of reality. While transitivity has been widely applied to literary, journalistic, and political texts, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to contemporary British prime ministerial inaugural speeches, especially those situated within transformative political contexts.

Against this backdrop, the present study applies transitivity analysis to Johnson's inaugural address in order to address the following questions:

- 1) What types of transitivity processes are employed in the speech, and how are they distributed across the discourse?
- 2) What functional roles do different process types play in structuring the address?
- 3) How do these process selections contribute to the representation of political intention and collective orientation?

By combining quantitative distributional analysis with qualitative clause-level examination, this study seeks to reveal how transitivity patterns participate in constructing political authority and projecting national direction at a moment of institutional transition.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on the Transitivity System

Since the 1960s, transitivity has occupied a central place in Halliday's Systemic

Functional Grammar (SFG). Halliday's early discussions focused on clause-level processes and the representation of experience, which later provided the theoretical basis for empirical explorations of discourse.

Matthiessen [1] conducted a systematic quantitative investigation of transitivity patterns, examining how frequently different process types are instantiated in discourse. He related these distributional patterns to levels of systemic elaboration, suggesting that frequency is not accidental but functionally motivated within the semantic system.

Over time, research has moved beyond theoretical exposition. Yang Rufu [2], for instance, applied transitivity analysis to the English translation of Chun Yun, demonstrating how experiential meaning is reconfigured across languages. Such work reflects an expanding interest in applying SFG to translation and literary studies. He Ning [3] extended the framework to political discourse through an analysis of Barack Obama's inaugural address, while Feng Shaoying [4], reviewing developments in China over the past decade, observed a gradual integration between traditional Chinese linguistic scholarship and SFG-based approaches.

Taken together, these studies indicate a shift from theory-driven discussion toward empirical application. Nevertheless, literary and translation-oriented research still appears more frequently than systematic investigations of contemporary political discourse.

2.2. Studies on Transitivity Analysis of Political Speech

With the growing application of SFG in discourse studies, transitivity has become an increasingly important tool for examining how political speakers construe agency, responsibility, and national reality through grammatical choices.

At the international level, Kondowe [5] analyzed the inaugural address of Malawian president Bingu-wa Mutharika, demonstrating how process selection contributed to leadership construction and ideological positioning. More recent research has broadened both genre and scope. Cabrejas-Peñuelas [6], for example, compared American and Spanish parliamentary addresses and showed how transitivity patterns interact with evaluative meanings to legitimize policy stances. Similarly, Osisanwo and Chinaguh [7], examining presidential concession speeches, illustrated how process choices help negotiate legitimacy and rhetorical closure during moments of political transition.

Within the Chinese academic context, transitivity-based research on political discourse has also developed steadily, though American presidential speeches remain the most common case materials. Liu Xuewei [8] examined Obama's West Point address, while Yang Qian [9] analyzed Obama's weekly radio speeches, linking process distribution to political positioning. Research on British political discourse is comparatively limited; however, Jiang Di [10] discussed transitivity in the Queen's 2017 Christmas speech, and Zhou Jing [11] compared Obama's and Trump's inaugural addresses to explore differences in leadership style reflected in process choice.

Overall, prior studies confirm that transitivity analysis provides a productive framework for interpreting political rhetoric. However, most analyses remain largely descriptive and concentrate on frequency patterns, with relatively less attention given to how transitivity choices are shaped by specific socio-political contexts.

2.3. Research Gap

Despite the growing body of transitivity-based research on political discourse, modern British prime ministerial addresses remain comparatively underexplored, especially in the context of contemporary political transitions such as Brexit.

Moreover, while previous studies have identified dominant process types and associated rhetorical effects, fewer have systematically examined how these linguistic patterns interact with specific historical pressures and institutional demands. The functional significance of transitivity choices during moments of national uncertainty therefore warrants further investigation.

Against this background, the present study analyzes the transitivity patterns in Boris Johnson's inaugural address, delivered at a critical stage of the Brexit process. By combining quantitative distributional analysis with qualitative interpretation, this study seeks to explain how process selection contributes to the construction of responsibility, leadership, and political direction within a concrete socio-political context.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Systematic Functional Grammar

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), developed by M. A. K. Halliday, approaches language as a meaning-making resource embedded in social contexts. Rather than viewing grammar as a set of abstract rules, SFG emphasizes the network of choices available to language users, through which speakers realize their communicative intentions. From this perspective, systemic grammar highlights language as a system of interrelated options, while functional grammar foregrounds the social purposes that linguistic forms serve. As Hu Zhuanglin [12] notes, linguistic structures are shaped by the functions they perform in communication. In other words, the organization of language reflects the demands of social interaction. Based on this framework, Halliday proposes that language simultaneously fulfills three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual [13]. These metafunctions represent different dimensions of meaning, namely how experience is represented, how social relations are enacted, and how discourse is organized.

3.2. Transitivity System

Within the framework of SFG, transitivity is concerned with how experience is represented in language. At the lexicogrammatical level, speakers encode their perceptions of events and reality through different configurations of process types, participants and circumstances. Through such selections, experiential meaning is

organized and structured in discourse. According to Halliday [14], the transitivity system categorizes human experience into several types of processes, each associated with specific participant roles and accompanying circumstances. Typically, processes are realized by verbal groups, participants by nominal groups, and circumstances by adverbial or prepositional phrases. By examining how these elements are combined, it becomes possible to explore how social actions, psychological states and relations are constructed linguistically. In this sense, transitivity provides a useful analytical tool for investigating how speakers shape their representation of the world.

3.3. Process Type

In Halliday's framework [15], process, participant and circumstance function as key analytical categories for describing how human experience is linguistically organized. Through these elements, events, states and relations in the external and internal world are interpreted and structured in clause form. Within the transitivity system, different clause types reflect different ways of construing experience. Halliday identifies six primary process types, including material, mental, relational, behavioural, verbal and existential processes. Each process type highlights a particular dimension of experience and contributes differently to meaning construction in discourse.

3.3.1. Material Process

Material clauses typically represent actions or events involving change. In Halliday's description [15], they construe processes of doing or happening, usually implying an input of energy that brings about a transformation. A material process necessarily involves an Actor, the participant responsible for initiating the action. In some cases, the process remains confined to the Actor, representing a simple happening. In other cases, the action extends to another participant, the Goal, upon which the outcome is realized. The distinction between clauses with only an Actor and those including a Goal corresponds roughly to intransitive and transitive patterns. This distinction will be particularly relevant in the analysis of how agency and responsibility are represented in the inaugural address.

3.3.2. Mental Process

Mental clauses, by contrast, represent inner experiences such as perception, cognition, affection and desire. They construe processes occurring within human consciousness rather than in the external material world [15]. Typically, a mental process involves two participants: the Senser and the Phenomenon. The Senser refers to the conscious entity that experiences the mental activity, while the Phenomenon denotes what is perceived, felt, or thought.

3.3.3. Relational Process

Relational clauses represent processes of being and having, and are typically used to ascribe qualities or establish identities [15]. They are generally categorized into

two modes: attributive and identifying. Attributive relational clauses assign a quality or characteristic to a participant, while identifying relational clauses equate one entity with another. In discourse analysis, relational processes often play a key role in constructing identity, evaluating social roles, and defining relationships.

3.3.4. Behavioural Process

Behavioural processes refer to physiological and psychological behaviours, such as breathing or smiling. They are generally considered less clearly defined than other process types because they share features of both material and mental processes [15]. A typical behavioural clause includes a Behaver and the behavioural process itself. Such clauses often describe observable actions that reflect an individual's mental or physical state.

3.3.5. Verbal Process

Verbal clauses encode acts of saying and reporting, and are frequently used to introduce or represent speech in discourse [15]. Besides the central participant, the Sayer, verbal processes may involve additional roles such as the Receiver, the Verbiage and, in some cases, the Target. In political discourse, verbal processes often function to attribute viewpoints, convey commitments, and construct dialogic interaction.

3.3.6. Existential Process

Existential processes construe the existence or occurrence of an entity or event. They typically introduce new information into the discourse and highlight the presence of certain conditions or situations. Although less frequent than other process types, existential clauses may serve strategic functions in emphasizing reality or inevitability.

Building on the transitivity framework outlined in this chapter, the present study examines the distribution of process types in Boris Johnson's inaugural address. To achieve this objective, a three-step analytical procedure is adopted. First, a qualitative analysis is conducted to identify and classify clauses according to their respective process types. Second, a quantitative analysis is carried out to calculate the frequency of each process type. Finally, the statistical results are interpreted in order to reveal patterns in the distribution of transitivity processes across the speech.

4. Transitivity Analysis of Boris Johnson's Inaugural Address

4.1. Overview of Boris Johnson's Inaugural Address

Boris Johnson delivered his inaugural address on 24 July 2019, at a pivotal moment in British politics. The speech contains approximately 1700 words and outlines his government's priorities amid the ongoing Brexit process.

In the address, Johnson first expressed appreciation for his predecessor and acknowledged the political challenges following the 2016 referendum. He then re-

affirmed his commitment to delivering Brexit and outlined key policy directions. The speech also included promises concerning law enforcement, healthcare reform, educational funding, infrastructure development and economic growth. In addition, Johnson emphasized national unity, cultural diversity and the United Kingdom's long-term strategic vision in areas such as trade, science, and environmental policy. The speech concluded with the declaration: "We in this government will work flat out to give this country the leadership it deserves and that work begins now. Thank you very much."

Unless otherwise specified, all quoted extracts in this chapter are drawn from the official transcript of Boris Johnson's inaugural address delivered on 24 July 2019, available on the GOV.UK website [16]. The text was used as published, with only minimal formatting adjustments such as the removal of headings and line breaks for analytical convenience. No lexical modifications were made to the original transcript.

4.2. Distribution of Clauses across Six Process Types

Clause segmentation follows Halliday and Matthiessen's [15] definition of the clause as the primary unit for representing experiential meaning. Each clause containing a distinct process was treated as an analytical unit. Coordinated clauses were counted separately, while embedded and non-finite clauses were included when they realized an independent process. This procedure resulted in a total of 189 clauses in the speech.

Process types were identified according to Halliday and Matthiessen's [15] classification of material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes. In cases where classification was potentially ambiguous, the semantic role of the verb within its clause context was considered. The coding of process types was reviewed in a second pass to ensure consistency across the dataset.

Table 1. Distribution of clauses across six process types.

Process	Quantity	Percentage
Material Clause	110	58.20%
Mental Clause	15	7.94%
Relational Clause	36	19.05%
Behavioural Clause	12	6.35%
Verbal Clause	8	4.23%
Existential Clause	8	4.23%
Total	189	100%

As shown in **Table 1**, a total of 189 clauses representing six process types can be identified in Johnson's inaugural address. Among them, material processes occur most frequently, with 110 instances, accounting for 58.20% of the total. Relational processes rank second, appearing 36 times (19.05%). Mental processes occur 15 times (7.94%), followed by behavioural processes with 12 instances

(6.35%). Verbal and existential processes are the least frequent, each occurring 8 times and accounting for 4.23% respectively.

4.3. Material Processes in Johnson's Inaugural Address

As noted above, material processes account for 110 clauses in Johnson's inaugural address, representing the dominant process type in the speech. Chapter 3 distinguished between intransitive material clauses, which construe events of "happening," and transitive material clauses, which typically involve deliberate action or "doing." The predominance of material processes in the present dataset is consistent with findings in previous studies of political speeches, where material clauses frequently dominate due to their action-oriented rhetorical function (e.g., Kondowe [5]; Cabrejas-Peñuelas [6]).

This section therefore offers a closer examination of how material processes function in the address. By analyzing their distribution and contextual use, the discussion seeks to uncover how Johnson constructs political action, frames the progress of Brexit, and projects his government's priorities in areas such as economic reform, national unity and foreign policy. For example, in the clause "we are going to restore trust in our democracy," the process "restore" functions as a material process, with Actor "we" and Goal "trust" in our democracy. The construction "are going to" signals planned future action, emphasizing the government's commitment to rebuilding confidence in democratic institutions.

4.3.1. Material Processes in Appreciating the Contribution and Efforts by Royal Family and the Predecessor

Examples include:

- 1) "I have just been to *see* Her Majesty ..."
- 2) "I *pay tribute to* the fortitude and patience of my predecessor"
- 3) "...the Queen *has just honoured* me ..."

The opening of the speech contains only a brief paragraph of formal acknowledgement. Expressions such as "pay tribute to" and "has just honoured me" reflect Johnson's respectful tone toward the monarch and his predecessor.

Given that the United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy, reference to the Queen serves an important symbolic function, reinforcing institutional continuity and legitimacy. At the time of the address, the country was experiencing political uncertainty surrounding Brexit. Under such circumstances, it is unsurprising that Johnson moved swiftly from ceremonial acknowledgement to the more pressing policy issues that structured the remainder of the speech.

Through his recognition of the previous administration's efforts, Johnson positions himself within an ongoing political process. Rather than assigning blame, the speech projects a sense of responsibility and determination, suggesting a forward-looking orientation in addressing national challenges.

4.3.2. Material Processes in Pushing Brexit Forward

Examples include:

- 1) "... we are going to *restore* trust in our democracy ..."

- 2) “We are going to *fulfill* the repeated promises of parliament to the people and *come out of* the EU on October 31 ...”
- 3) “We will *do* a new deal, a better deal that ...”
- 4) “... we will *have cracked* it ...”
- 5) “... we aren’t going to *wait* 99 days ...”
- 6) “The time *has come* to act ...”
- 7) “... to *take* decisions, to *give* strong leadership, and to *change* this country for the better ...”
- 8) “... we *are forced* to come out with no deal...”
- 9) “... we ... *take advantage of* Brexit.”
- 10) “... this country is now *set* with high hearts ...”
- 11) “... we will now *accelerate* the work of getting ready ...”

The material clauses cited above show a strong emphasis on action in relation to Brexit. One noticeable feature is the repeated use of the collective Actor “we,” as in examples (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (8), (9), and (11). By using “we” so consistently, Johnson places himself alongside the nation and presents Brexit as a shared task rather than a personal project.

In example (1), the process “restore” takes “trust” as its Goal, suggesting an effort to rebuild confidence in democratic institutions. In examples (2) and (3), verbs such as “fulfill” and “do” point to commitment and planned action. These choices highlight movement and implementation, giving the speech a forward-looking tone.

Future constructions such as “we will do” and “we will have cracked it” further reinforce this sense of determination. The future perfect form in example (4) is especially striking, as it treats Brexit as something that will already have been achieved, which strengthens the impression of confidence.

In example (6), the Actor “time” introduces a sense of urgency and frames Brexit as an immediate priority. In example (7), the sequence of verbs—“take,” “give,” and “change”—creates a rhythm of action, emphasizing leadership and transformation.

Although the passive structure in example (8) shifts focus away from a specific Actor, the clause still conveys momentum. Likewise, the expression “take advantage of” in example (9) presents Brexit as an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Overall, the high frequency of material processes in this section contributes to an image of decisiveness and action. Through repeated dynamic verbs and collective Actors, the address portrays Brexit as urgent but attainable. At this stage, however, the speech remains more rhetorical than technical, focusing on commitment rather than detailed policy explanation.

4.3.3. Material Processes in Putting Forward New Measures and Policies

Examples include:

- 1) “... we are going to *begin* with another 20,000 police on the streets and we *start* recruiting forthwith.”
- 2) “... we *start* work this week with 20 new hospital upgrades, and *ensuring* that

money for the NHS really *does get* to the front line.”

- 3) “... we will *fix* the crisis in social care”
- 4) “... *give* every older person the dignity and security ...”
- 5) “... your kids *get* a superb education ...”
- 6) “... we *level up* across Britain with higher wages ...”
- 7) “... *giving* millions of young people the chance to *own* their own homes...”
- 8) “... to *boost* British business and to *lengthen* this country’s lead ...”
- 9) “... we *are using* gene therapy ...”
- 10) “... will *help* cut CO₂ ... for the next generation.”
- 11) “... to *create* free ports that *will drive* growth and ...”
- 12) “... to *liberate* the UK’s extraordinary bioscience sector ...”
- 13) “... *develop* the blight-resistant crops ...”
- 14) “... *timing* satellite and earth observation system ...”
- 15) “... *change* the tax rules to *provide* extra incentives to *invest*...”

The material clauses in this section mainly relate to domestic policy. In examples (1) and (2), verbs such as “begin” and “start” are used to signal that action will be taken without delay. The mention of specific figures, including “20,000 police” and “20 new hospital upgrades,” gives the promises a concrete dimension. Rather than remaining general statements, these clauses appear tied to measurable initiatives.

In example (3), the clause “we will fix the crisis in social care” combines the collective Actor “we” with the direct verb “fix.” The lexical choice is straightforward and action-oriented, presenting the issue as something that can be addressed through governmental effort. In example (4), Goals such as “dignity” and “security” shift attention to the anticipated social effects of policy, linking practical measures with human concerns.

Example (5) deals with education and noticeably uses the present tense (“get a superb education”) instead of the future. This shift in tense makes the projected outcome sound less distant and more immediate. In examples (6) and (7), references to wages and housing implicitly position different social groups—such as young people and older citizens—as potential beneficiaries. Through these participant choices, the address broadens its social scope.

Examples (8) and (9), with verbs like “boost,” “lengthen,” and “use,” extend the focus to economic growth and technological development. Example (10), which refers to cutting CO₂ emissions, introduces environmental responsibility into the agenda. Meanwhile, examples (11) to (15) touch on ports, bioscience, agriculture, satellite systems, and tax policy. The range of processes and Goals here reflects the breadth of the proposed initiatives rather than a single thematic focus.

Taken together, the material processes in this section present the government as active in multiple domestic areas, including public services, employment, industry, and environmental policy. Compared with the earlier Brexit-related clauses, these domestic clauses tend to contain more concrete references and sector-specific wording. Through repeated action verbs such as “fix,” “start,” “cre-

ate,” and “develop,” the speech suggests administrative momentum, even though detailed implementation plans are not elaborated at this stage.

Beyond their numerical dominance, the material processes in the address also reveal a patterned configuration of agency. A notable feature is the high frequency of the collective Actor “we,” which appears consistently across Brexit-related commitments and domestic policy initiatives. This repeated allocation of agency to a collective participant serves to diffuse individual responsibility while simultaneously projecting inclusiveness. Rather than presenting political action as emanating solely from the Prime Minister, the discourse distributes agency across government and nation, thereby constructing Brexit as a shared undertaking.

At the same time, certain clauses strategically background agency. In expressions such as “we are forced to come out with no deal” or clauses framed around temporal Actors such as “the time has come,” responsibility is partially recontextualized as circumstantial necessity. Such configurations mitigate potential attribution of blame by framing action as historically compelled rather than personally initiated.

Furthermore, the predominance of dynamic verbs—“restore,” “fulfill,” “fix,” “create,” “accelerate”—generates a forward-driving semantic rhythm. Even in the absence of detailed implementation mechanisms, these material selections construct a trajectory of movement and progress. In this respect, transitivity choices do not merely reflect policy content; they actively participate in shaping the speech’s persuasive momentum. The action-oriented experiential pattern aligns with the communicative demand of the Brexit moment, where decisiveness itself functions as a performative political resource.

4.4. Mental Processes in Johnson’s Inaugural Address

There are 15 clauses of mental process in the address, accounting for 7.94% of the total. As discussed in Chapter 3, mental processes construe acts of sensing and typically involve two participants: the Senser and the Phenomenon. Compared with the more dominant material processes, mental processes reveal attitudes, evaluations, and states of awareness expressed by the speaker.

4.4.1. Mental Processes in Praising the Country

Examples include:

- 1) “... we politicians *need to remember* it is that the people are our bosses ...”
- 2) “... whose brand and political personality *is admired* and *even loved* around the world for our inventiveness ...”

In example (1), the Senser is “politicians,” and the Phenomenon concerns the recognition that “the people are our bosses.” The process “remember” emphasizes reflection and accountability. Rather than expressing action, the clause highlights an attitudinal stance toward democratic responsibility.

In example (2), the mental processes “admired” and “loved” evaluate the nation’s global image. These selections construct a positive appraisal of national

identity. By invoking collective pride, the clause contributes to a discourse of unity. In the context of political transition, such positive evaluation can serve to reinforce solidarity across different regions of the United Kingdom.

4.4.2. Mental Processes in Carrying the Political Intention

Examples include:

- 1) "... come out with no deal not because we *want* that outcome..."
- 2) "... farming sector will be... *waiting* to continue selling ..."

In example (1), the mental process "want" makes the government's stance on a "no-deal" outcome explicit. The verb allows the speaker to signal preference without committing to concrete action. In this sense, the clause conveys attitude rather than material change.

In example (2), the clause containing "waiting" suggests anticipation rather than direct action. Although "wait" is generally treated as a behavioural process rather than a typical mental one, it still carries a psychological undertone. The farming sector is presented as being in a state of suspension amid Brexit uncertainty. Set beside "want" in Example (1), "waiting" introduces a contrast between stated intention and lived uncertainty. The speech thus points not only to governmental preference, but also to the sense of delay experienced by certain social groups.

4.4.3. Mental Processes in Reshaping Public Confidence

Examples include:

- 1) "I *believe* that with energy and application ..."
- 2) "... because we *know* the enormous strengths ..."

In example (1), the mental process "believe" foregrounds the speaker's personal conviction. Unlike material processes, which project action, "believe" conveys assurance at the level of attitude. By explicitly stating belief, the speaker signals confidence and invites the audience to share in that perspective.

In example (2), the mental process "know" presents national strengths as established and undeniable. Rather than introducing new information, the verb suggests shared understanding. By invoking what "we know," the clause appeals to collective memory and reinforces a sense of continuity.

Together, these mental processes contribute to a rhetoric of reassurance. While material clauses in the address emphasize action and policy, clauses containing "believe" and "know" function to consolidate confidence and stability. Rather than dwelling on uncertainty, the address emphasizes what is portrayed as the country's enduring strengths.

4.5. Relational Processes in Johnson's Inaugural Address

There are 36 clauses of relational process in the address, accounting for 19.05% of the total. As outlined in Chapter 3, relational processes can be divided into attributive and identifying types. Compared with material processes, relational clauses do not describe action, but rather define states, identities, or evaluations.

4.5.1. Relational Processes in Framing the Brexit Situation

Examples include:

- 1) "... this country *has become a prisoner* to the old arguments of 2016 ..."
- 2) "... we *are incapable of* honouring a basic democratic mandate."
- 3) "... those critics *are* wrong."

In example (1), the relational clause identifies "this country" with the metaphorical role of "a prisoner." This identifying structure frames the national situation as constrained and immobilized. By selecting such a relational construction, the speech presents Brexit not merely as a political issue, but as a condition affecting the country's agency.

Example (2) is an attributive relational clause in which "we" functions as Carrier and "incapable of honouring a basic democratic mandate" serves as Attribute. The clause evaluates the nation's condition through a statement of limitation. Rather than describing specific actions, it defines a perceived state of political stagnation.

In example (3), the Carrier "those critics" is characterized by the Attribute "wrong." This simple relational structure allows the speaker to evaluate opposition directly. By assigning this Attribute, the speech draws a boundary between competing interpretations of Brexit and reinforces its own position without elaborate argumentation.

4.5.2. Relational Processes in Defining the Prime Minister's Role

Examples conclude:

- 1) "My job *is* to serve you ..."
- 2) "My job *is* to make your streets safer ..."
- 3) "My job *is* to make sure ..."
- 4) "My job *is* to protect ..."

All four clauses are identifying relational processes. In each case, "my job" functions as the Token, while the infinitival phrases that follow ("to serve you," "to make your streets safer," etc.) serve as the Value. This repeated structural pattern foregrounds role definition rather than concrete action. By consistently placing "my job" at the beginning of the clause, the speaker frames responsibility as central to his identity at a time of political transition and uncertainty. The repetition also creates rhythmic emphasis, presenting responsibilities in a deliberate and cumulative sequence. Rather than detailing specific Brexit measures or domestic reforms, these relational clauses establish a broader framework of duty.

Through this identifying structure, the address defines leadership in terms of service, protection, and accountability amid debates over the country's future direction. In this way, relational processes complement earlier material clauses by articulating not what has already been implemented, but what is institutionally expected of the office under such circumstances.

4.5.3. Relational Processes in Articulating Commitments

Examples include:

- 1) "... because it *is* time we unleashed the productive power ..."

- 2) "... the banks will be ready ..."
- 3) "... and the factories will be ready ..."
- 4) "... and business will be ready ..."
- 5) "... and the hospitals will be ready ..."
- 6) "... we *will have* the extra lubrication of the £39bn ..."
- 7) "... the first step *is* to repeat unequivocally our guarantee ..."

Relational clauses in this section are largely used to express projected states and anticipated readiness. In examples (2) to (5), the attributive relational structure "X will be ready" assigns preparedness as an Attribute to various institutional actors, including banks, factories, businesses, and hospitals. The repetition of this pattern creates a parallel structure and suggests systemic coordination across sectors.

Example (1) contains the identifying structure "it is time...", which frames action as timely and necessary. The relational verb "is" presents urgency as an established condition rather than a matter for debate.

In example (6), "will have" functions to attribute anticipated possession, linking financial resources with future capability. Example (7), similarly, uses the identifying relational process "is" to define "the first step" in procedural terms. Such constructions clarify sequence and priority without detailing implementation.

Compared with material clauses, which emphasize action, these relational clauses highlight projected conditions, readiness, and structured commitments. Together, they contribute to a discourse that presents policy intentions as organized and forward-oriented.

4.6. Behavioural Processes in Johnson's Inaugural Address

There are 12 clauses of behavioural process in the address, accounting for 6.35% of the total. As discussed in Chapter 3, behavioural processes typically construe physiological or psychological behaviour and often occupy an intermediate position between mental and material processes.

Examples include:

- 1) "We *looked* not at the risks ..."
- 2) "Never *mind* the backstop ..."
- 3) "I will *tell* you something else about my job..."
- 4) "... *answering* at last the plea of the forgotten people..."

In examples (1) and (2), the verbs "looked" and the imperative "never mind" approximate mental orientation, as they relate to perception and evaluative stance. In the context of Brexit debates—particularly discussions surrounding risk and the so-called backstop—these behavioural choices guide the audience's focus and suggest how the unfolding situation should be interpreted.

Examples (3) and (4), by contrast, are closer to verbal behaviour. The process "tell" foregrounds direct engagement with the audience, while "answering" frames political action as a response to earlier appeals and public concerns raised during the Brexit process. In these instances, behavioural processes reduce the distance

between speaker and listeners at a time of heightened political scrutiny.

Compared with material processes, which emphasize policy action, behavioural clauses introduce moments of engagement and responsiveness. Amid ongoing Brexit negotiations, such clauses highlight attentiveness and interaction, reinforcing the address's persuasive dimension without detailing specific measures.

4.7. Verbal Processes in Johnson's Inaugural Address

There are 8 clauses of verbal process in the address, accounting for 4.23% of the total. As outlined in Chapter 3, verbal processes typically involve the Sayer and may include additional participant roles such as Receiver, Verbiage, and Target. Although relatively few in number, these clauses play a noticeable rhetorical role in the speech.

Examples include:

- 1) "I *say* directly to you ..."
- 2) "And so I *am announcing* now ..."
- 3) "I *say* do not underestimate this country..."

In each case, "I" functions explicitly as the Sayer. The repetition of this first-person Sayer foregrounds personal authority and responsibility at a moment marked by ongoing debates over Brexit. Verbal processes such as "say" and "announce" mark instances of formal declaration, distinguishing key commitments—particularly those related to the UK's withdrawal process—from the surrounding discourse.

Compared with material or relational clauses, verbal clauses create a more direct interaction between speaker and audience. In the context of political uncertainty surrounding Brexit negotiations, such declarative moments emphasize immediacy and resolve. Through these verbal selections, the address reinforces its performative dimension, presenting policy positions as publicly asserted commitments rather than abstract intentions.

4.8. Existential Processes in Johnson's Inaugural Address

There are 8 clauses of existential process in the address, accounting for 4.23% of the total. The "there + be" pattern is the most frequently used structure within this category.

Examples include:

- 1) "... *there is* a vital sense in which ..."
- 2) "... *there will be* difficulties ..."
- 3) "... *there is* one point we politicians need to remember ..."

In these clauses, the existential structure introduces new elements into the discourse, such as "a vital sense," "difficulties," and "one point." In the context of Brexit-related uncertainty, these "there be" constructions allow the speaker to acknowledge conditions surrounding the negotiations without assigning responsibility to particular actors. Instead, challenges are presented as objective realities accompanying a period of transition.

In example (2), the clause “there will be difficulties” anticipates obstacles linked to the process of leaving the European Union while avoiding direct attribution of cause. This syntactic choice frames the situation as part of a broader political environment rather than as the result of individual decisions. Similarly, examples (1) and (3) foreground abstract notions (“a vital sense,” “one point”) that prepare the audience for clarification, positioning Brexit as an issue that requires collective recognition rather than immediate dispute.

Overall, existential processes in the address function to establish the background against which Johnson’s Brexit agenda is articulated. While material clauses emphasize action, existential clauses acknowledge the conditions under which that action is to take place, thereby contributing to a measured and composed rhetorical stance.

5. Conclusions

This study has examined Johnson’s inaugural address through the lens of transitivity theory and has identified a clear predominance of material processes. Relational processes occur with noticeable frequency as well, while mental, behavioural, verbal, and existential processes appear comparatively less often. The prominence of material clauses underscores the action-oriented character of the speech, particularly in its handling of Brexit and domestic reform. Relational clauses, meanwhile, work to define institutional roles and national conditions, whereas mental processes contribute to the articulation of conviction and assurance.

The distribution of process types appears closely related to the communicative demands of the political moment. Delivered amid Brexit-related uncertainty, the address relies heavily on dynamic verbs and the collective Actor “we” to project resolve and shared responsibility. At the same time, relational and existential constructions help stabilize the discourse by presenting urgency and preparedness as already established conditions. This configuration is particularly striking in the repeated projection of future action through material clauses, which gives the speech its forward-driving momentum.

Several limitations merit acknowledgment. The present analysis is confined to a single inaugural address, and a broader corpus might reveal whether the patterns identified here are consistent across Johnson’s other speeches. In addition, while this study has focused on transitivity, incorporating other dimensions of systemic functional linguistics—such as thematic organization or interpersonal meaning—could yield a more layered account of political discourse. Future comparative research, especially across different leaders or historical contexts, may further clarify how linguistic resources are mobilized to construct political authority and credibility.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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