

THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMINIST IDEOLOGY IN THE POEM 'HOW TO TRIUMPH LIKE A GIRL' BY ADA LIMON: A TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study aims to examine transitivity patterns in Ada Limon's poem 'How to Triumph Like a Girl'. The poem has been studied earlier from literary lens, but no prior study has revealed how it builds agencies and generates meaning through various functions of language. Based on Halliday's ideational metafunction, the study investigates different types of processes, participants and circumstances by dividing the poem into 13 clauses; extending this, it also reveals how particular word choices construct meaning through the use of modalized and modulated processes. The study applied mixed-method as there is a quantitative analysis of how many times a specific transitivity pattern occurs and a qualitative analysis on how the meanings are constructed through those instances. Analysis showed that mental processes, both modalized and modulated, were prevalent in the poem. Findings showed the participant arc moves from I-the writer to You-the reader which eventually leads to It-the heart of the writer. There is a shift of perspective too that showed uncertainty at the beginning by low modality 'as if' ending on high modality 'going to' showing absolute clarity. The study concludes that Limon's feminist ideology as portrayed in the poem reveals a feminine triumph which is both personally felt and widely acknowledged.

Keywords: *Transitivity Patterns, Mixed-Method, Poem, Feminist Ideology, Ideational Metafunction*

Introduction

Language is more than words; it is a meaning making resource. Identities and ideologies are built through linguistic choices. To study what has been portrayed and how, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is used. Transitivity as a core of SFL is used to portray reality. It uncovers hidden meanings and messages and shapes up experiences. The current study aims to analyze transitivity (process types) and modality in Ada Limon's poem 'How to Triumph Like a Girl' published in Limon's poetry collection *Bright Dead Things* which was released by the publishing house Milkweed Editions in the United States in 2015.

Limon, an American Poet Laureate, has been widely read for feminist themes in contemporary era. Her poem 'How to Triumph Like a Girl' has been studied earlier through literary lens. The study explored her use of language as metaphors, similes and imagery. But no study has yet addressed how she has portrayed the certainty of a female heart to come at first. The poem uses different processes, participants and circumstances to construe a female heart by first comparing it with a female horse giving it the confident of a lady horse swagger and then claiming the feminine triumph in the end. She also used Modality-interpersonal metafunction for this purpose; she uses processes to depict intentions and beliefs of what a woman wants and certainly knows.

Research Objectives

The study aims:

1. To identify and analyze the different types of transitivity processes employed in Ada Limon's poem *How to Triumph Like a Girl*.
2. To examine how the linguistic choices in the poem construct a feminine narrative.
3. To investigate how the modality arc transitions from uncertainty to absolute clarity throughout the poem.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the different types of transitivity processes employed in Ada Limon's poem 'How to Triumph Like a Girl'?
2. How do the linguistic choices construct a feminine narrative?
3. How does the modality arc transition from uncertainty to absolute clarity?

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

This study is based on two of the three metafunctions of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics: the ideational and the interpersonal. "Systemic Functional Linguistics is concerned with the ways in which the various parts of the language function together in order to provide the resources for meaningful communication. It is also concerned with the ways in which language functions in society as a means of communication" (Banks, 2019, p.2). "The fundamental components of meaning in language are functional components. All languages are organized around two main kinds of meaning, the 'ideational' or reflective, and the 'interpersonal' or active" (Halliday, 1994, p.xiii).

The meaning of a message operates at a clause level in three different ways termed as three metafunctions. The metafunctions as termed by Halliday are ideational, interpersonal and textual. The ideational metafunction (field/clause as representation) deals with the articulation of experience. It is the basis of transitivity analysis which Halliday explains as who does what to whom under what circumstances. It contains process types, their participants and circumstances that collectively make meaning, as Halliday called language a meaning making resource. The interpersonal metafunction (tenor/clause as exchange) deals with the relationship of speaker with the content of his/her message (modality) and the relationship a speaker establishes with his/her addressees (mood). The textual metafunction (mode/clause as message) deals with the ways in which a message is structured.

This study is based on transitivity (ideational metafunction) with identifying some layers of modality (interpersonal metafunction). "The clause is a mode of reflection, of imposing linguistic order on our experience of the endless variation and flow of events. The grammatical system by which this is achieved is that of TRANSITIVITY" (Halliday, 1967). "The system of TRANSITIVITY provides the lexicogrammatical resources for construing a quantum of change in the flow of events as a figure - as a configuration of elements centred on a process. Processes are construed into a manageable set of PROCESS TYPES. Each process type constitutes a distinct model or schema for construing a particular domain of experience" (Halliday, 2014, p.213)

Transitivity as the core of ideational metafunction, construes human experiences and thoughts through its six major processes and their participant roles.

SFL as a tool has been in use since Halliday's foundational work in 1960's to examine the language functions, the meaning certain words carry, how the words are portrayed in a discourse, who are the participants, which verbal groups they use, the circumstances under which the processes happen, the relationship between the addresser and the addressee and how the message or information is structured-all is studied in this domain. (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004)

Since the research is focused on Transitivity, following are the various process types.

1. Material Process

These include the actions happening in the physical world with their participants called as 'Actors'. The participant, actors, carries out the process; the affected participant is called a goal, range, client or beneficiary, depending on the action that has taken place.

2. Mental Process

As material processes express the happenings of the physical world, Mental Processes are concerned with the consciousness of a being. They not only describe what is being sensed, but also focus on what is perceived, wanted or is affected. The primary participant of the process is 'Senser' and what is sensed or perceived is termed as 'Phenomenon'.

3. Relational Process

The relational processes show the relationship between two entities. It further has categorizations as Relational Attributive Clause, with the participant which is attributed is termed as the 'Carrier' and the one that attributes is called 'Attributive'. Another type of relational process for establishing the identity is Identifying Relational Clause with 'Token' and 'Value' as its participants. To show possessions, Possessive Relational Clause is also used with 'Possessor' and 'Possessed' as its participants.

4. Verbal Process

A verbal process shares the instance of both mental and relational processes (particularly when using helping verbs). The 'Sayer' as a participant communicates with another participant of the process called the 'Receiver', who is usually a human entity, and whatever is said in the process is labeled as the 'Verbiage'.

5. Existential Process

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), existential processes exhibit similarities with both material and relational processes. The usage of 'verb be' makes it similar to relational processes whereas the participant, the object of existence, the 'Existent' may refer to any action happening, a human being or physical entity which puts it in the category of material processes too. The identification of existential clauses becomes easy as they usually start with 'There' as a subject.

6. Behavioural Process

The behavioural processes relate to human physiological and psychological behaviours; they are placed on the scales between material and mental processes. The participant who behaves is called a 'Behaver' and the thing one performs is 'Behaved'. The summary of process types and their participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Process Types and Participants

Sr. no.	Process Type	Participants
1.	Material: Action Event Causative Achievement	Actor, Goal/Range/Client/Beneficiary
2.	Mental Cognition perception Affection Volition/desiderative	Senser, Phenomenon
3.	Relational Attributive Identifying Possessive	Carrier, Attribute Token, Value Possessor, Possessed
4.	Verbal	Sayer, Verbiage, Recipient

5.	Existential	Existent
6.	Behavioural	Behaver, Behaved

Review of Related Literature

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is widely applied to literary texts to uncover the messages and ideologies hidden behind linguistic choices as language in SFL is thought to be a meaning making resource. Within SFL, transitivity serves as a major analytical tool which allows researchers and analysts to interpret the ideologies built through language usage. Pasaribu et al. (2020) investigated the use of SFL in understanding literary works. Their work showed that SFL does not only interpret, but also its offers explanatory categories for literary texts. It shows the utility of SFL in literary analysis; thus, it directly supports this study.

Further, Heidari Darani (2014) and Qasim et al. (2020) showed that SFG can be easily applied to various text genres for different purposes-either to build or remove agencies, to persuade someone or to use specific linguistic choices to inculcate a new idea. Anggun (2016) analyzed and evaluated different descriptive texts in an English textbook using Transitivity system to study schematic structures and linguistic features. Additionally, Suparno et al. (2026) highlighted the importance of SFL in shaping narratives by investigating the role of language in addressing environmental challenges. They studied language patterns in print media and employed descriptive-qualitative techniques to study environmental discourse.

Transitivity is also applied to political discourse to uncover ideologies in speeches. Rehman (2018) compared Imran Khan and Mahatir Muhammad's political speeches to explain how language is used to build vision and national actions.

Moreover, Bhatti et al. (2019) while studying Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' found that although there is a considerable amount of material processes in the drama, but they are goalless and agentless too; whereas, the current study demonstrates how Limon uses different processes to reach up a goal; therefore, the material processes in Limon's *How to Triumph Like a Girl* are highly agentic in nature. Likewise, Rajendra (2020) applied the theory of transitivity to analyze the verbal structures in speech bubbles and caption boxes in an abridged text based on the novel 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth.'

Transitivity is not only applicable to political speeches, drama, textbook analysis; it is also equally applicable to poetry. Farooq et al. (2024) showed how W.H. Auden used language to create the meaning of the text through experiential metafunction. Abed and Mohammed (2015) examined Langston Hughes' early poems by applying theory of transitivity to highlight the poet's stylistic choices. They found that character actions and themes were communicated through material and mental processes. Similarly, a study on Noshi Gilani's poem 'The Flower is Torn at the Heart' conducted by Majeed et al. (2024) showed how material and mental processes build themes of desire and disloyalty. Furthermore, Novari and Gumelar (2022) explored the application of transitivity by applying it to a couple of poems and found that different process types, specifically, material processes dominated to construct the meaning of the poems. Another study by Imran et al. (2025) confirmed the utility of ideational metafunction in the construction of social hierarchies and power dynamics through linguistic choices.

Through the use of language, ideologies are built. Transitivity analysis of feminist discourse reveals how in different time periods, different ideologies were created, represented and discarded. Ahmed and Ali (2026) conducted analysis of six poems of Charlotte Perkins Gilman where, through different linguistic choices, women are presented as passive beings; they are treated as 'Goals' and 'Carriers' instead of 'Actors' in a male dominant society. Through the use of ideational metafunction, they highlighted the patriarchal society where females in Victorian era were given passive representation. However, in contemporary feminist

discourse, the shift is changed from passive to active representation where the language of empowerment has also changed and has taken a critical turn to what is now called ‘Toxic Positivity’. Nawaz and Qasim (2025) investigated TED Talks of women empowerment activist Dr. Quratulain Bakhtari by applying transitivity and found how discourse is shaped to promote pain, suffering and infusing toxicity in an optimistic and motivating manner. In another study, Nawaz and Qasim (2025) studied TED Talks of women empowerment activist Shiza Shahid by applying transitivity and found how discourse is shaped to promote pain, suffering and infusing toxicity in an optimistic and motivating manner

Ahmad et al. (2026) studied Limon’s poem ‘How to Triumph Like a Girl’ through a literary lens. Their focus was on identification of different literary devices. While their work provides valuable insights on exploring the poem on literary aspects, it did not address how the language is employed through different processes, their participants and circumstances. The current study aims to analyse the poem ‘How to Triumph Like a Girl’ by Ada Limon by applying transitivity and extending it to interpersonal metafunction specifically modality. The work is significant as it traces the participant roles, from ‘I’ to ‘You’ leading to ‘It’, and modality arc shifting from uncertainty to absolute clarity which helps defining feminine triumph in the end.

Methodology

The current study employed a mixed method approach to analyze Ada Limon’s ‘How to Triumph Like a Girl’. The poem was read closely multiple times for its qualitative analysis to interpret meaning of certain instances by applying transitivity. The poem was divided at clause level to identify different processes, their participants and circumstances. After analysis, the processes were classified for their quantitative analysis. Using both methods, qualitative and quantitative, ensures the complete description and explanation of transitivity patterns in ‘How to Triumph Like a Girl’.

The poem was chosen by using the technique of purposive sampling from the internet on the basis of its theme and linguistic choices. The poem ‘How to Triumph Like a Girl’ was published in *Bright Dead Things* by Milkweed Editions. The poem was analysed using Halliday’s ideational metafunction, transitivity. The poem was first classified into clauses; the clauses were then analysed closely for their processes and their associated participant roles. The study extends to the interpersonal metafunction, modality, to uncover the shift in ideology from being uncertain to reaching complete certainty. The processes were classified as material, mental, behavioural, relational and existential with their participant roles as actor, senser, behavior, carrier and existent. Modalized and modulated processes were also identified. The data were put in a tabular form to find out frequencies and to explain which process type dominates to construct ideology.

Analysis and Discussion

The transitivity analysis of Ada Limon’s ‘How to Triumph Like a Girl’ reveals how language is used to construct ideologies. The process types and their participants actively build up a feminine narrative. The poem starts with describing why lady horses are best and building on this idea, it ends at the feminine urge and certainty to triumph.

Clause by clause analysis of the poem is structured below:

Clause 1:

I like the lady horses best
degree

best: circumstance of

Mental Process

Process Type: **Mental** (Affective): like
horses

Senser: I

Phenomenon: the lady

The poem starts with a mental affective process with the senser 'I'. There is a positive emotional expression of the speaker by stating what is been liked. The superlative degree 'best' in the first clause of the poem suggests the personal preference of the writer. 'Like' additionally functions within the extended interpersonal metafunction, Appraisal framework. It is a powerful starting point of a feminist poem, not with an action, but with a feeling.

Clause 2:

how they make it all look easy
all)

Look easy: projected attribute of Goal (it

how: subordinating conjunction

Material Process

Process Type: Material (Causative): make all	Actor: they	Goal: it
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It is a material causative clause starting with 'how' as a rhetorical question urging the reader to think. 'They' is projected as an actor of the clause which refers back to the lady horses. Look easy is a projected attribute of the goal 'it all'. It asserts on the fact that the horses do not merely appear easy, they make it all look easy. The agency is active; the horses are actively causing an effect on the world. This is a key ideological point of the poem where 'easy' is not shown as weakness, rather it is shown as a feminine strength, building up the narrative of the poem.

Clause 3:

like running 40 miles per hour is as fun as taking a nap, or grass

Relational Process

Process Type: Relational Attributive: is Carrier: running 40mph nap	Attribute: as fun as taking a
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The clause consists of a relational attributive process 'is' with 'as fun as taking a nap' as an attribute. This clause shows the ultimate feminine strength of doing something so hard like 'running 40 miles per hour' and comparing it with fun and taking nap, encoding power as something natural with no effort or recognition required.

Clause 4:

I like their lady horse swagger after winning
time

after winning: circumstance of

Mental Process

Process Type: Mental (Affective): like swagger	Senser: I	Phenomenon: their lady horse
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It is the repetition of the mental affective process with the senser 'I'. The phenomenon 'lady horse swagger' is significant as 'swagger' is generally associated with masculinity, but here the writer has deliberately chosen this for showing feminine confidence after victory.

Clause 5:

Ears up, girls, ears up!

Behavioural Process

Process Type: Behavioural up	Receiver: girls	Behaviour: ears
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Modulation: Obligation (Imperative)

This is significant as an imperative clause. The clause consists of a behavioural process with 'girls' as receivers who are directed to behave in a certain way. Here, the writer breaks from mere observation and affection to a command. The imperative mood of the clause carries

obligation as a modulated process. The command here suggests the girls not only to think, but show through actions of heading up that they are proud of their femininity. The repetition of 'ears up' tells that it is not presented as a choice, rather it is a duty now to show collective feminine pride.

Clause 6:

But mainly, let's be honest, I like that they're ladies

But: Contrastive Conjunction, mainly: Circumstance of manner (degree)

Mental Process

Process Type: Mental (Affective): like ladies	Senser: I	Phenomenon: that they're ladies
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let's be honest:

Modulation: Inclination (Collaborative): Let us

Relational Process: Attributive (honest)

Embedded Clause: They're ladies

Relational Process: are, Carrier: they, Attribute: ladies

The clause starts with a discourse marker 'but mainly' which now connects why the writer has been in admiration of lady horses a lot. There is a repetition of mental affective process with 'I' as a senser. Here, femininity has become an object of admiration. The embedded clause 'They're ladies' is a relational process with carrier 'they' and 'ladies' as attribute. 'Let's be honest' is a modulated process of inclination which shows the collaborative understanding of the writer's thoughts. The writer not only observes the femininity, she claims it, wants it and admires it.

Clause 7:

As if this big dangerous animal is also a part of me

Relational Process

Process Type: Relational (Identifying): is	
Token: this big dangerous animal me	Value: a part of

Modalization: As if (low probability)

Clause 7 has a relational identifying process. The clause starts with 'as if' which shows low probability through a modalized process which dismantles as the poem progresses. 'The big dangerous animal is a part of me' merges the powerful dangerous female animal with writer's own body. Here, being dangerous radiates femininity.

Clause 8:

that somewhere inside the delicate skin of my body, there pumps an 8-pound female horse heart giant with power, heavy with blood

Existential Process

Process Type: Existential	Process: pumps	Existent: an 8-pound female horse heart
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Circumstance (Location): somewhere inside the delicate skin of my body

Existential Marker: there conjunction	that: subordinating
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circumstance of manner (quality): giant with power, heavy with blood

The existential process of *pumping of a heart* brings the horse's heart into the writer's body. The circumstance of location 'somewhere inside the delicate skin of my body' is significant as it uses 'delicate' in contrast to a female horse heart which is massive in size. Fragility and power coexist in the same body, giving the writer the strength along with femininity. Also, there are two attributes, 'giant with power' and 'heavy with blood'. The

attributes ‘giant’ and ‘heavy’ are conventionally associated with masculinity, but the writer here has given these attributes to a female horse heart making it strong and powerful.

Clause 9:

Don’t you want to believe it?

Mental Process

Process Type: **Mental** (Desiderative): want

Senser: you **Phenomenon:** to believe it (infinitive phrase explaining what is being wanted)

Modulation: (Median Inclination): (offer) want to=desiderative inclination

This is a significant shift in the participatory role; the writer has shifted reader’s attention by a shift in the pronoun from ‘I’ to ‘You’. The writer has directly addressed the readers making them to think. The clause is a rhetorical question with mental desiderative process of ‘want’. The modulated process of inclination offers the readers to believe; the writer has moved her stance from confession to confrontation.

Clause 10:

Don’t you want to lift my shirt and see the huge beating genius machine

Mental Process

Process Type: **Mental** (Desiderative): want

Senser: you

Phenomenon: to lift my shirt and see the huge beating genius machine (infinitive phrase acting as phenomenon explaining what is being wanted)

to lift: (infinitive) material action with lift as action and my shirt as goal

to see: (infinitive) mental (perception) with phenomenon: the huge beating genius machine

Modulation: (Median Inclination): (offer) want to=willing to, asking for willingness

Different processes are layered in a single clause with mental desiderative process as the main process where desire leads to physical actions of ‘to lift’ and ‘to see’. Senser here is ‘You’ with ‘to lift my shirt and see the huge beating genius machine’ as a phenomenon. The attention is again directed towards the readers through modulated process which offers and invites the readers to see the strong and full of energy heart. Although, the writer refers to herself by using the expression ‘my’, this symbolically represents all females. The same process been repeated again in a sequence enacts a logical chain that if you want to know the truth, you need to perform an action to see. This clause demands for external recognition and validation.

Clause 11:

that thinks

Mental Process

(there is no phenomenon here)

Process Type: **Mental** (Cognitive): thinks

Senser: that (relative pronoun referring back to the huge beating genius machine)

The heart has been given a cognitive mental capacity of thinking through a mental cognitive process with ‘that’ as a senser referring back to heart-a huge beating genius machine. The heart which is huge, genius and heavy is attributed with cognitive abilities which merges biology with intellect thus dismantling the opposition between female embodiment and female intelligence.

Clause 12:

no, it knows

Mental Process

Process Type: **Mental** (Cognitive): knows **Senser:** it **no:** discourse marker

The clause starts with ‘no’ to let the writer self-correct from ‘thinking’ to ‘knowing’ with certainty. The clause has mental cognitive process. This is an important shift in the poem, from possibility to certainty. The writer interrupts herself claiming feminine triumph as certain-which is known.

The clauses 11 and 12 have no explicitly stated modal markers, but they perform modality through the processes of ‘thinks’ in clause 11 and ‘knows’ in clause 12 which switches from low certainty to high certainty.

Clause 13:

it’s going to come in first

Material Process

No goal has been stated here, it suggests the self-victory of the writer

Process Type: **Material** (Achievement): come in first **Actor:** it

Modalization: going to (near certainty) expresses high probability

The poem closes with a material process of achievement. The writer has shown her absolute clarity of self-victory and feminine triumph. It has a modalized process showing near certainty through ‘going to’ which shows high probability of ‘coming in first’. The actor ‘it’ refers to both, the female heart and the writer. The psychological transformation of the poem from thinking, believing, wanting, and admiring to knowing is the central concern of the poem.

The analysis showed that the participant ‘I’ is mostly used to reflect the writer’s inner thoughts and admiration. Then there is a shift to second person pronoun ‘You’ to let the reader think and to perform a physical action to believe and see the feminine strength of a female heart. At last, ‘It’ takes the participatory role of thinking, believing and knowing that it is going to come at first.

There is also a shift in modality portrayed through modalized and modulated processes. The modality arc shifts from uncertainty to absolute certainty announcing the feminine triumph at the end of the poem. The summary of frequencies of the processes is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Frequencies of Various Processes

Sr. no	Process Types	Modalized	Modulated	Total: 13
1.	Mental			7
	Affective	-	-	3
	Desiderative	-	2	2
	Cognitive	2	-	2
2.	Relational			2
	Attributive	-	-	1
	Identifying	1	-	1
3.	Material			2
	Causative	-	-	1
	Achievement	1	-	1
4.	Existential	-	-	1

5.	Behavioural	-	1	1
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The table contains frequencies of different processes. The mental processes are highest with 7 instances present in the poem. After that, relational processes and material processes have 2 instances each. Existential and behavioural processes have one instance each.

A study on transitivity analysis of W.H Auden's poem 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' by Farooq et al. (2024) showed contrastive results with material processes dominating the poem. Whereas, in Limon's poem 'How to Triumph Like a Girl', there is a prevalence of mental processes. The domination of mental process suggests that the triumph at the end of the poem is more ideological rather than physical. It is an emotional cognitive experience of the writer through active use of the processes of liking, wanting, thinking and knowing. Traditionally, where women were presented as goals and carriers, here is the active representation of women who are the sensors of their own realities.

The use of relational process is crucial for establishing speaker's identity. In the embedded clause 'they're ladies', the writer relates being a female to the female horse with giant and powerful heart. Similarly, the identifying process is used to identify the speaker with a dangerous female horse, unifying a delicate being with a dangerous animal energy.

Material processes concerned with physical activity are used for describing causative action of showing how the horses make it easy to run 40 miles per hour and achievement in the last clause claiming victory in near future.

One existential process used in the poem depicts that the strength of a female heart is not only a feeling, but it is a physical entity that exists inside the delicate skin. The use of behavioural process is to direct the readers to not only think, but behave by holding their heads high up to show that they are proud of their femininity.

Conclusion

The current study identified and analysed Ada Limon's poem 'How to Triumph Like a Girl' using transitivity as a theoretical framework. Through mixed-method approach, the analysis helped in identifying number of times a process repeats and its interpretation. The study revealed construction of feminist ideology through linguistic choices. The modality and participation arc in the poem are significant turning points. The participation arc shifted the attention from speaker to reader, and the modality arc showed the less probable situation turning into absolute probability, claiming certain feminine triumph.

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