

## SOCIETAL EXPECTATION AND SELF-IDENTITY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S 'THE NEW DRESS': AN ANALYSIS FROM SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE

**Nimra Ijaz,**

Mphil Scholar, NUML Peshawar (nimraijaz950@gmail.com)

**Dr. Tariq Mahmood,**

Assistant professor, NUML Peshawar (tqmahmood@numl.edu.pk)

### Abstract

*This paper aims to analyse the crises between identity and expectation in *The New Dress* written by Virginia Woolf, using transitivity theory of language in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). In this mixed method study, the researcher takes the text of the short story and analyses transitivity processes in it. The paper offers an insight into the practical application of transitivity theory and into the ways in which the author depicts the stream of consciousness and also shows the conflicts that she faces in her identity portrayal. The author has used many transitivity process among which the researcher has identified three of them. Mental processes are explicitly used in the short story and the main character faces many conflicts in her mind in order to make herself prominent but all she does is to fall in depression. Similarly, the relational and material processes are used where she interacts with other people in order to make herself independent of the thoughts she is facing but nothing changes. And she goes to the mirror again and again to see herself but every time she see herself, she feels ridicule. The study concludes that the author has used mental processes in majority, followed by relational, and material processes. The results show the way various transitivity processes are used by Virginia Woolf as techniques to structure language in the short story to elicit various functions in the text.*

**Key words:** *The New Dress, Systematic Functional Linguistics, Transitivity processes, self-identity*

### Introduction

Systemic Functional Linguistics was developed by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday in the 1960s. It is a theory centred on the notion of language function. The present research study investigates the short story "*The New Dress*" written by Virginia Woolf. The study adopts transitivity theory of Systemic, Functional Linguistics proposed by Michael Halliday. The researcher takes, three processes mainly in the story and through these transitivity processes the researcher analyze the mental state and the identity of the main character. This study offers a general discussion of the short story, and the statistical account of various transitivity processes followed by their contribution to the incorporation of the themes. So, before delving into all the processes we will have an account of introduction about the story.

It is well known that clothes are not only a kind of fabric that we wear over our bodies, but it is too a sign of identity that shapes the perception of a person's self and also other. In "*The New Dress*" by Virginia Woolf, the main character goes through a lot of feelings and experiences while dealing with a society that has very clear social levels. The story shows how people's clothes and appearance can say a lot about them in this structured society. So, basically, it's about how the main character's emotions play out in a society where what you wear can speak volumes about you. This purpose of the study is to look into how the norms of society and personal identity are shown in Woolf's important book. It will use a functionalist approach to examine how clothing influences the characters' lives and relationships. Basically, it's about how and what she wear affects how she see herself, how other sees her and how does this effecy her interaction with others in the story. In "*The New Dress*" by Virginia Woolf, the main character, Mabel Waring, is used to show how society's rules and expectations clash with personal wishes. Woolf tells a story that highlights the

struggle between what someone wants and what society expects them to be. It's basically about how Mabel deals with what she wants versus what society thinks she should do.

From the lens of functionalism, this story gives a very precious opportunity to know how different elements of the story work together to give us a proper structure and meaning. With the help of this lens, the researcher will reveal how the characters, plot, setting, point of view, themes and literary devices combine and play the role together to convey Woolf's message. With the help of this analysis, we will find out the basic mechanism that take the story's exploration of individuality, societal expectations, and gender roles, through light on the author's craft and intended meaning. By finding out the functional aspects of the story, we will gain a deeper understanding of how Woolf's work continues to resonate with readers today. In simpler terms, Woolf's story is set in early 20th-century London, a time when there were strict social classes and specific rules about how people should dress and behave. In simpler terms, Mabel in the story feels really insecure and self-conscious at a fancy party in London during the early 1900s. Her obsession with her new dress shows how she struggles with what society expects from her versus what she wants for herself. It's all about how clothing can be a way for people to negotiate and resist societal pressures.

Mabel is torn between blending in and being herself. She feels pushed to meet society's expectations of how a woman should be, limiting her true identity by taking on society's beauty and social norms as her own. In basic terms, Woolf shows how Mabel's thoughts and conversations with others reveal how clothing influences how we see ourselves in society, emphasizing how fashion rules can deeply affect how we think about ourselves. Mabel is stuck between following the crowd and being herself. She feels the pressure to meet society's expectations but also wants to show her true self. Mabel is stuck between following the crowd and being herself. She feels the pressure to meet society's expectations but also wants to show her true self. Mabel feels like she has to fit society's idea of how women should be, which makes her take on these external beauty and social norms as her own, holding back her true self. Through Mabel's internal monologue and interactions with other characters, Woolf illuminates the subtle yet pervasive ways in which clothing mediates the negotiation of social identity, underscoring the profound impact of sartorial codes on individual conscious.

### **Statement of the problem**

As Mabel Waring struggles with social standards of behaviour and appearance, the narrative "The New Dress" focusses on her internal conflict. The issue at hand is the way that social influences mould people's sense of self, especially in social settings where rejection from others can cause unease. A larger problem of how cultural standards affect self-esteem and self-worth and the difficulty of striking a balance between one's own authenticity and the need to fit in is reflected in Mabel's endeavour to win praise with her new attire. This calls into question how societal expectations affect people's self-esteem and how difficult it is to be true to oneself in a critical social setting.

### **Research Question**

1. How many kinds of transitivity processes are used in the short story "The New Dress"?
2. How have these transitivity processes portrayed different functions in the story?

### **Literature review**

There are various ways in which texts are analyzed. One of those ways is transitivity analysis of SFL. Nowadays, the SFL approach is used in almost all languages world-wide, especially in language education, and for various other purposes like discourse analysis

(Almurashi, 2016). This approach is characterized as an applicable linguistic theory, which means it is designed in such a way that it has the potential to be applied to solve problems that arise in speech communities around the world. Halliday (2008, as cited in Almurashi, 2016) states that he wants to create a coherent tradition of language which will be applicable, so that it can be of benefit to large number of people who somehow engage with language in course of their work. Virginia Woolf's short story "The New Dress" has been a subject of critical analysis from multiple literary scholars, each offering unique insights into its themes of societal expectation and self-identity. Societal expectations and self-identity are dominant themes in Virginia Woolf's 'The New Dress'. The story revolves around Mabel Waring's struggle to reconcile her desire for self-expression with the societal expectations placed upon her as a middle-class woman in the 1920s. From a functional perspective, the story can be seen as an exploration of how societal expectations shape individual identity and constrain personal freedom.

Mabel's struggle to assert her self-identity is a dominant theme in the story. Her thoughts and feelings are shaped by societal expectations, leading to a fragmented and contradictory sense of self (Brace, 1946). Woolf's use of stream-of-consciousness narration reveals the inner workings of Mabel's mind, exposing the tension between her true self and the self she presents to society (Rice, 1984). Mabel's self-identity is shaped by her relationships and societal roles, highlighting the functional perspective of self-identity as a product of societal expectations (Mott, 1972). Several scholars have examined the ways in which Woolf critiques societal expectations and gender roles in 'The New Dress'. For example, Hussey (2006) argues that the story is a commentary on the restrictive nature of gender roles and the ways in which women are socialized to prioritize appearance over individuality. Similarly, Baldwin (1989) notes that Mabel's struggle to assert her own identity is a reflection of the societal pressures that women face to conform to traditional gender norms. Woolf's use of stream-of-consciousness narration in 'The New Dress' has also been seen as a functional device that allows readers to experience Mabel's inner thoughts and feelings in real-time. This narrative technique has been praised for its ability to capture the fragmented and often contradictory nature of human thought (Brace, 1946). From a functional perspective, the stream-of-consciousness narration can be seen as a way to reveal the ways in which societal expectations shape individual identity and constrain personal freedom. The dress itself has also been interpreted as a symbol of societal expectations and gender roles. Mabel's desire for a new dress can be seen as a desire to break free from the constraints of her traditional gender role and assert her own individuality (Chapman, 1972). The dress can also be seen as a symbol of the societal pressure to conform to traditional gender norms, as Mabel feels compelled to wear a dress that she does not truly want in order to fit in with societal expectations.

Scholars like Judith Lee Rosenbaum ("Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision") and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (The Madwomen in the attic) have explored how Woolf's portrayal of female characters challenges traditional gender roles and exposes the limitations imposed by patriarchal society. They argue that Mabel's internal struggle reflects broader societal pressures on women to conform to rigid standards of femininity. Psychoanalytic perspectives, such as those of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, have also been applied to Woolf's work. Critics like Julia Briggs ("Reading Virginia Woolf") and Rachel Bowlby (Feminist destination and further essay on Virginia Woolf) analyze Mabel's anxiety and self-consciousness through a psychoanalytic lens, interpreting her fixation on the dress as a manifestation of deeper insecurities and desires. They suggest that Mabel's struggle for self-identity reflects the unconscious conflicts inherent in the human psyche.

Structuralist critic including Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss, have focused on the narrative techniques employed by Woolf in "The New Dress." Susan Dick ("From Mrs. Dalloway to The Waves: New Feminist Readings") and Mary Jacobus (Reading Women: Essay in Feminist Criticism) examine Woolf's use of stream-of-consciousness and free indirect discourse to depict Mabel's subjective experience. They argue that Woolf's narrative style destabilizes conventional notions of identity and reality, inviting readers to question the stability of meaning and the construction of selfhood.

These critical perspectives offer valuable insights into Woolf's exploration of societal expectation and self-identity in "The New Dress." By examining the story through feminist, psychoanalytic, and structuralist lenses, scholars illuminate the complexities of Woolf's portrayal of female subjectivity and the ways in which individuals negotiate their sense of self within the constraints of social norms and conventions.

Fashion, fiction and urban anxiety in "The new dress" by Anne E. Fernald (2008) examines Woolf's portrayal of fashion and its significance in shaping identity and social interactions in "The New Dress." The study explores how clothing serves as a symbol of social status and self-expression, shedding light on broader themes of identity and societal expectations in Woolf's writing. Virginia Woolf's Aesthetic theory and practice: the example of 'The New Dress' by Pamela L. Caughie (1989) analyzes Woolf's aesthetic approach in "The New Dress" and its implications for understanding themes of clothing, identity, and societal expectations. The study examines how Woolf's narrative techniques and characterization reflect broader concerns about gender roles and social constraints. "Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernism" by R. S. Koppen's (2013) work examines the intersections between fashion, identity, and literary modernism in Woolf's writing. Although not limited to "The New Dress," this study offers a broader perspective on how clothing functions as a site of cultural and social meaning in Woolf's narratives.

### **Research methodology**

Using the lens of functionalism the research methodology that is being used in this study is a mixture of both type of research i.e. it is a blend of both, qualitative and quantitative. It is quantitative research because the researcher has gone for the statistical and numerical measurement of the processes that are used by the writer. In addition, it is also a qualitative research because the researcher has also analyzed and has gone for the thematic analysis, which is based upon the qualitative analysis and elucidation of the selected text. The researcher has examined the short story "The New Dress" by Virginia Woolf to understand how different aspect of society function together to uphold stability and fulfill specific functions. The researcher did a close reading of the selected short story "The New Dress" by Virginia Woolf and analyzed that how external factors play a significant role in shaping Mabel's self-worth and identity, and delved into the themes through a functionalist lens, and explored how symbolism, narrative technique and character interaction in societal norms function to shape individual identity within the narrative. This approach allows for a focused study on the functional aspects of societal expectations and self-identity as depicted in "The New Dress," providing a structured and in-depth analysis from a functionalist viewpoint.

### **Data collection**

The linguistic method known as transitivity analysis has been used to examine Virginia Woolf's short story "The New Dress", which was written in 1924 and published in 1927. This method divides the verb phrases employed in the narrative into various categories according to their nature and purpose. These kinds of processes are manually counted and categorised; they are basically the states or acts that the verbs express. The proportion of each process type is determined once the total number of processes has been counted in order to comprehend their distribution and importance within the story's themes. Following that, these

percentages are displayed in tables that show how certain actions or occurrences relate to each theme.

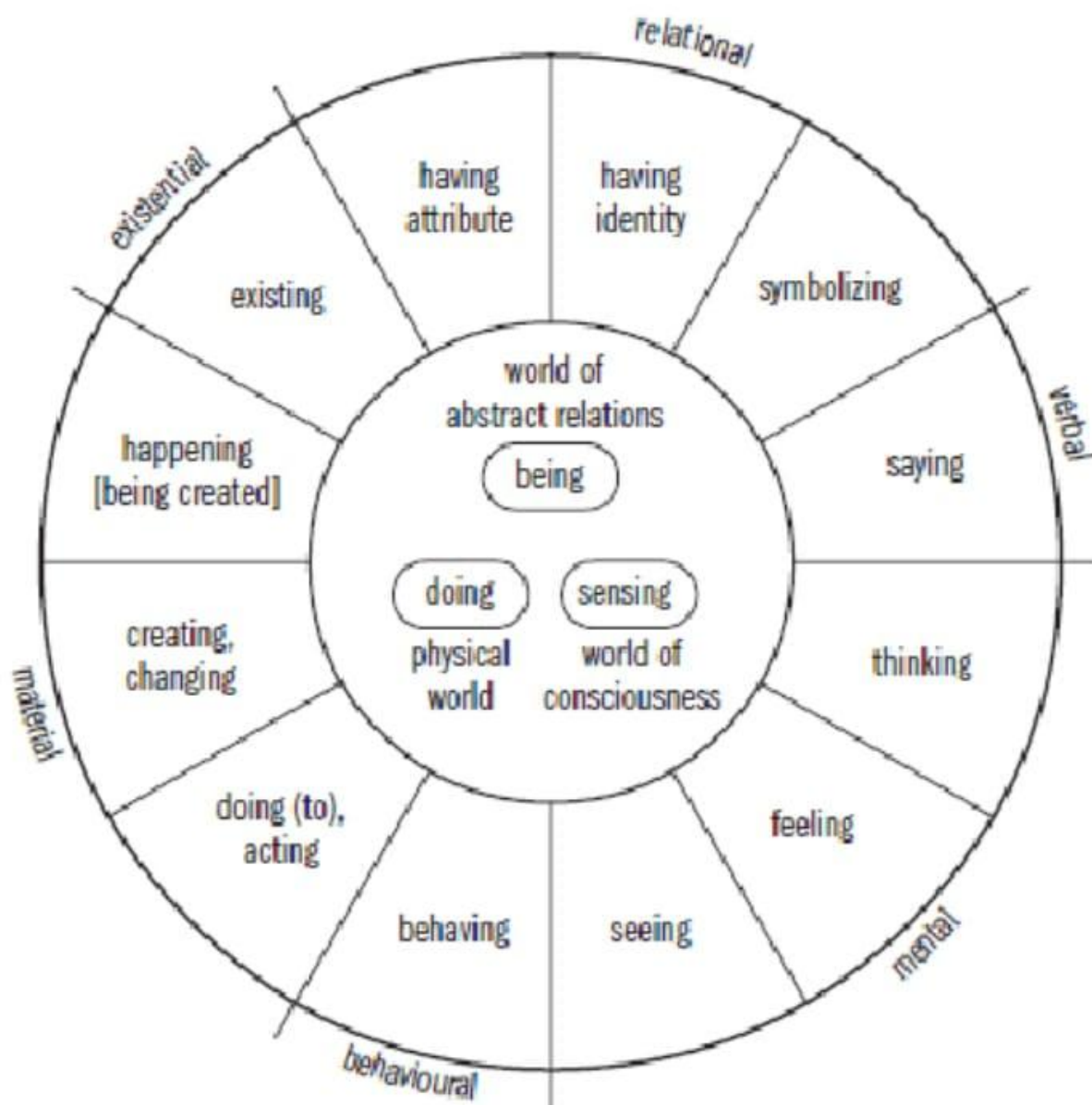
### **Theoretical framework**

Transitivity theory of SFL by Halliday is based on the traditional concept of transitive and intransitive verbs: verbs that need a direct object for giving complete sense are said to be transitive while those that do not take a direct object are known as intransitive verbs, while those that are used with or without a direct object are called di transitive verbs, so, Halliday developed this concept and termed it as Transitivity system in his theory (Bustam, 2011). There are three key elements in transitivity system: the process itself which is realized by Verbal group, the participants which are the entities or people involved in those processes, and they are often realized by nominal groups, and the circumstances which are associated with those processes. Furthermore, the processes have been divided into the following six types (Alvin, 2016) but here we are concerned with only three of them that are below;

The work that can be seen and have existence. Its participants are actor, goal, scope, recipient, beneficiary, and attributes are material processes. In relational processes the participants are either, carrier and attribute, token and value or possessor and possession, depending on its subtypes namely: Relational-attributive, Relational-identifying and Relational-possessive. On the other hand, mental process is one that can be experienced and felt. It is associated with cognition, perception and affection; its participants are sensor and phenomenon.

Apart from the above processes and participants associated with them, the following circumstances are also included in this framework: extent, location, manner, cause, accompaniment, matter and role (Alvin, 2016)





In this diagram of transitivity processes the researcher will be concerned with only three of them that will be discussed below.

### **Data Analysis**

As the research article is about finding the transitivity processes in “The New Dress” here the researcher have analyzed three transitivity processes that are material process, mental process and relational processes. The researcher have also analyzed the number and percentage of these process in the story using quantitative analysis. And how are they used in order to make understand the reader their function and role in the overall, meaning of the story with the help of qualitative analysis.

Below are the total number of the 3 types of transitivity process that the researcher have find out in the analysis

In Virginia Woolf's "The New Dress," the mental process of the protagonist, Mabel Waring, is central to the story. The narrative delves into inner thoughts and perceptions of Mabel as she attend an event while she feels so shy, self-conscious of appearance and status.

One significant mental process explored in the story is Mabel's self-consciousness and insecurity. As she attends the party, Mabel becomes increasingly preoccupied with her dress, worrying that it is not fashionable or impressive enough compared to the attire of the other guests. This preoccupation reflects her deep-seated anxieties about her social standing and acceptance by others. Another mental process at play is Mabel's tendency to compare herself unfavorably to others. Throughout the story, she notices and fixates on the elaborate dresses

Mental processes	Relational processes	Material processes
16	9	10
12.5%	8.34%	12%

worn by the other women at the party, feeling inadequate in comparison. This process of comparison exacerbates Mabel's feelings of inferiority and heightens her sense of alienation in social settings. Additionally, Woolf explores Mabel's inner dialogue and stream of consciousness as she navigates the party. Through Mabel's thoughts and reflections, the reader gains insight into her complex inner world, including her insecurities, fears, and desires for acceptance and validation. Overall, Woolf's portrayal of Mabel's mental processes in "The New Dress" offers a nuanced exploration of self-consciousness, insecurity, and social anxiety, highlighting the internal struggles faced by individuals in navigating social situations and perceptions of self-worth.

Additionally in Virginia Woolf's "The New Dress," the concept of "material processes" as defined in systemic functional linguistics isn't explicitly present, as the story is more focused on psychological and social dynamics rather than physical actions. However, if we broaden the interpretation to include physical actions, transformations, and objects within the narrative, we can identify some elements that could be considered as material processes. However, in Virginia Woolf's "The New Dress," material processes are significant in conveying the themes of appearance, identity, and social class. The story revolves around Mabel Waring's experience at a high-society party, where her new dress becomes a focal point of her thoughts and interactions. One prominent material process is the description and examination of Mabel's dress. Woolf meticulously details the fabric, style, and embellishments of the dress, highlighting its significance as a symbol of Mabel's attempt to fit into the elite social circle. The dress serves as a material manifestation of Mabel's desire for acceptance and validation, but it also becomes a source of insecurity and self-doubt as she worries about its adequacy compared to the attire of other guests.

Moreover, the story explores the material aspects of Mabel's surroundings at the party, such as the opulent decorations, luxurious furnishings, and exquisite refreshments. These elements underscore the contrast between Mabel's middle-class background and the affluent world she temporarily inhabits, emphasizing her feelings of alienation and discomfort. Additionally, material processes are evident in Mabel's interactions with objects and clothing throughout the story. For example, Mabel's preoccupation with the details of her dress and her attempts to adjust it reflect her heightened awareness of the material world and its significance in shaping social perceptions. Overall, material processes in "The New Dress" serve to highlight the complexities of appearance, status, and identity in a social context, as well as the ways in which material objects can influence interpersonal dynamics and self-perception. Here are some shown below;

**Making the dress:** While not directly depicted in the story, the process of making Mabel's new dress involves physical actions such as cutting, sewing, and assembling fabric. Although Woolf doesn't detail this process, the dress itself is a physical object that represents a material process.

**Wearing the dress:** Throughout the story, Mabel wears the new dress to the party she attends. This involves the physical act of putting on the dress and embodying it, which affects her perception of herself and how others perceive her.

**Movement:** Characters move within physical spaces throughout the story, such as Mabel navigating the party venue. These movements are material processes that contribute to the dynamics of the narrative.

**Observing and interacting with physical objects:** Mabel and other characters in the story observe and interact with various physical objects, such as the dress itself, other guests' attire, and items in the party venue. These interactions involve material processes that shape the characters' experiences and perceptions.

**Changes in physical environment:** As the story progresses, there may be changes in the physical environment, such as shifts in lighting, temperature, or the arrangement of furniture. While these changes are not explicitly described, they can be inferred as part of the backdrop against which the narrative unfolds.

While "The New Dress" primarily focuses on internal thoughts, emotions, and social interactions, these elements of physicality and materiality contribute to the overall texture of the story and enrich its portrayal of characters and settings.

Relational process is another important aspect used in the story contributing to the exploration of Mabel's Waring's and her interaction with the external environment.

In Virginia Woolf's "The New Dress," relational processes are central to the narrative. The story follows the protagonist, Mabel Waring, as she attends a high-society party. Throughout the story, Woolf explores Mabel's internal thoughts and perceptions as she navigates social interactions and reflects on her own sense of self-worth. One key relational process in the story is Mabel's perception of herself in relation to others at the party. She constantly compares herself to the other guests, particularly in terms of their attire and social status. Mabel's feelings of inadequacy and self-consciousness stem from her belief that she does not belong among the fashionable and elite attendees. Additionally, the story depicts Mabel's interactions with other characters, such as her conversations with her husband and with other party guests. These interactions reveal the dynamics of Mabel's relationships and highlight her feelings of alienation and discomfort in social settings.

Overall, relational processes in "The New Dress" play a significant role in shaping Mabel's experiences and perceptions, ultimately highlighting themes of self-consciousness, social anxiety, and the complexities of human interaction. She is so confused and wants to relate herself to other and wants to be the better among them. She does the following things in her relation with others

**Identifying:** Mabel engages in the process of identifying herself in relation to others at the party. She compares her appearance, status, and social standing with those of the other guests, which influences her sense of self-worth.

**Relating:** Mabel navigates various social interactions at the party, relating to different characters with varying degrees of familiarity and comfort. Her interactions with others shape her perceptions and emotions throughout the story.

**Evaluating:** Mabel evaluates her relationships with other guests based on their reactions to her appearance and demeanor. She seeks validation and acceptance from those around her, which impacts her self-image and confidence.



## Conclusion

The author Virginia Woolf has used the transitivity processes in the short story. And all the transitivity processes has their function and play their own specific role in the story. The mental process is mainly concerned with the stream of consciousness. Similarly, the material and referential processes show the protagonists relation with the environment and how she shapes her self-identity on the basis of her comparison with the people around her in the party. The researcher concludes that the all the three processes used by the writer in the story depicts the protagonists mental state, how she assume herself and the people around her each processes has perform its own function in the identification and portrayal of the themes, the mental state and the identity of the main character Mabel. The analysis indicates the way the writer's use of various techniques for depicting the selected themes and the study explored these themes through transitivity patterns. As mentioned earlier, this study was delimited to the analysis of the transitivity processes related to the selected process only and other aspects of the short story and other meta-functions do not come under the ambit of this study. The researcher recommends to future researchers to go for the analysis of other aspect and processes such as behavioral process, existential process and verbal process.

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