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Transitivity Analysis of Obama's Selected Speeches addressed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Abstract

The paper examines the two speeches of Barack Obama during his tenure as President of the United States from 2009 to 2017. This study investigates the issues that are faced by Middle-East countries, namely, Iraq and Afghanistan. In other words, it is an attempt made to understand how the 44th American president constructs the issues that are confronted by Middle-East countries. The speeches are understood and analysed using Systemic Functional Linguistics, more specifically, the Experiential Metafunction.

Key Terms: Transitivity, Experiential Metafunction, Political Discourse.

Conceptual Framework

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is an approach of language that was developed by M.A.K. Halliday in the 1960's. Eggins (1994, 1) states that the systemic approach is gradually accepted as a realistic mechanism for understanding language as a medium of making meaning and is embedded in social semiotics.

SFG shows its concern that the users of a language usually choose between completely different linguistic selections available to them when they speak or write. For this aim functional grammar provides the system of transitivity that is operational at the clause level. The analysis and interpretation of the transitivity system of a particular language is mainly concerned with how the Ideational function of that particular clause is designed in terms of process types, participants and circumstances.



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Halliday and Mattheissen (2004) propose that “the clause construes a quantum of change as a figure or configuration of the process, participants involved in it and any circumstances (169). Thus, the experiential metafunction shows how the “goings on” in the world is embodied within the System of Transitivity.

Review of Literature on Transitivity across genres

An investigation of Transitivity in the “Transcripts of the Hearings from South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC) Amnesty Committee” was carried out by Holopainen (2005). The focal point of the study was on noting the Transitivity related to the question on ‘who did what to whom’ and to investigate what kind of linguistic features may cause the equivocalness with respect to this inquiry. This examination reveals what role the participants of the clause plays and what is the identity of the participants who are affected in the clause.

In the study conducted by Shayegh (2012), SFL was applied to study the political discourse of Obama and more specifically the role of power that was shown through the Transitivity system. For this seven interviews of Obama were shortlisted and selected. The findings show that Obama primarily used material process type to characterize the work of his government.

“Analysing Political Speeches- Rhetoric, Discourse and Metaphor (2014) by Jonathan Charteris Black is to give a fresh insight to the readers on how political discourses can inspire, encourage, acknowledge and also manipulate the different linguistic means used.

“Ideational Grammatical Metaphors-Applications in Selected Registers”, a seminar paper by Gabriele Grenkowski discusses the subject of grammatical metaphors with special emphasis on ideational grammatical metaphors and their use in other registers.

An examination of Transitivity and process types to uncover the impact of disciplinary variety in genres pertaining to written academic language was conducted by Babaii and Ansary (2005). The aim was to analyze the components of Transitivity in a corpus of 90 scholarly book reviews.



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They discovered via the study that the investigation of process types and their participants shows the high percentage level of participants that are non-human in the book reviews pertaining to physics as contrasted with the journals of literature and sociology.

Aim of the Paper

Given the intent of the current paper, the system of Transitivity is chosen to reveal the Experiential meaning in the addresses of Obama. The Transitivity system as a tool will be significantly helpful in figuring out the connections between Obama as a speaker in the context of Middle-East issues. The current study is restricted to answer the research question who does what to whom or in other words the presence and identity of social agents. The term ‘agent’ is referred to the person or an entity that performs an action described by a verb, or a process. An agent will therefore typically be a person who is named individually, though it could also be a social category, such as ‘investors’, ‘welfare claimants’ or ‘scroungers’ (Black 101). So, this paper seeks to find out the process types and what is involved in these processes in the context of Middle-East issues present in the speeches of Obama.

Data Selection

Since the current paper seeks to concentrate on President Obama’s political discourse on the issues of the Middle-East countries namely Iraq and Afghanistan, the speeches taken were reviewed and chosen to determine what problems the Middle-East faces. From this point it was determined that these two speeches would be a good source as the required data because they contain similar motifs. Because each of the selected speech deals with variety of motifs, the analysis only looks at the most recurring of them in the speeches under analysis.

The speeches were downloaded from the website americanrhetoric.com. Selecting these two speeches was based on the fact they contained common motifs. Therefore, based on this selection criterion the clauses will be valid for analysis to help understand the construction of the motifs that are common within Obama’s discourse.



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Data Description

The data is in the form of transcripts that the president addressed. The data consisted of issues that are faced largely by Middle-East countries. The selected speeches were delivered in different years. Table 1.1 shows the speeches in terms of time of delivery and place of delivery.

Table 1.1

Speech Name	Location	Date of Delivery
Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq	Camp Lejeune, North Carolina	27-02-2009
Afghanistan Troop Reduction Address to the Nation	White House, Washington D. C.	22-06-2011

America's 44th President won the 2008 presidential election and became the United States America's official leader. In 2012, he won the election again. Obama revealed his plans for future in order to address the Middle-East in his 2008 presidential campaign, hence, indicating his foreign policy in the Middle-East countries.

The speeches that are analyzed in the paper are considered to be significant because they contain a new American approach of that of reconciliation. Through these speeches, the president explained the actual relationship between the Middle-East countries and the west and how it should be in the times to come. He primarily stressed the need for the restoration of peace in the Middle-East countries of Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama has been steadily moving to fulfill his campaign promise to end the U.S. military mission in Iraq since he entered the White House in January 2009.

The issues that Obama deals in the two speeches relate to the wars and conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Therefore, throughout the two speeches the repetitive motifs that Obama

addresses are the “Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity between the West and Middle-East countries and “The Removal of U.S. military troops from Iraq and Afghanistan”. Table 1.2 shows the distribution of the recurring motifs across the two speeches.

Table 1.2 (Recurring Motifs across the two speeches)

Speeches	MotifsofCooperation/Solidarity/ Unity	Motif of the Removal of U.S. military troops from Iraq and Afghanistan
Speech 1 Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq	√	√
Speech 2 Afghanistan Troop Reduction Address to the nation	√	√

It can be seen from Table 1.2 that both the speeches encompass the two motifs i.e.

- Motif of Cooperation/ Solidarity/ Unity
- Motif of The Removal of U.S. military forces from Iraq and Afghanistan

1.6 The mechanism of Transitivity and participant roles realized in the two motifs of the speech.

This section is an attempt made to answer the research question i.e. how is the experiential meaning realized within the discourse of the motifs in the two speeches through the process types and the participant roles. This outlook would help to understand Obama’s interpretation of Middle-East issues. In addition to it would explain how the president addresses the issues such as activities related to war or politics, people and government etc. In other words, which categories of who, what and whom are involved within the motifs in the speeches under analysis.



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In the selected data, it was found that the process types that are used in majority are Material Processes and the Relational Process Type while Mental Process and Verbal Process are used less in number. The use of Existential and Behavioural was found to be nil in the speeches. Table 1.3 shows the incidence of process types in each of the two motifs:

Table 1.3

No.	Motifs	No. of Process Types	Percentage
1.	Solidarity/ Cooperation/Unity	36	29.75%
2.	Removal of U.S military from Iraq and Afghanistan	34	28.09%
	Total	70	57.84%

Formula:

Total number of all process types in each motif

$$\frac{\text{Total number of all process types in each motif}}{\text{Total number of all process types in the data}} \times 100 = \%$$

Total number of all process types in the data

Table 1.3 shows the total number of six processes within each motif of the speeches i.e. Material Process, Verbal Process, Relational Process, Behavioural Process and Existential Process. It can be seen that the processes that are used differ considerably from one motif to another. From the data it can be concluded that the motif with the highest number of incidence of process type is the one in which Obama is seen to be most engaged in. Table 1.4 shows the number of each process type identified in the motifs of the speeches.



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Table 1.4

Incidence of each process type in terms of frequency across the two motifs:

Process Type	Number of Processes	Percentage
Material	51	72.85%
Relational	09	12.85%
Verbal	09	12.85%
Mental	01	1.42%
Behavioural	00	00
Existential	00	00
Total	70	99.97

Formula:

Number of each process type across the motifs

$$\frac{\text{Number of each process type across the motifs}}{\text{Total number of all process types in the data}} \times 100 = \%$$

Total number of all process types in the data

Table 1.4 shows the incidence of each process type across the two motifs in terms of frequency. It can be seen that Material process records the highest percentage i.e. 72.85% while Relational and Verbal processes share equal number clauses, thus standing at 12.85% respectively. Mental process type is used marginally at 1.42% while Existential and Behavioural are not used. Such statistics suggest that Obama makes use of certain process types more over other process types.

1.7 Types of Processes and Participant Roles under the motif “Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity”



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Under the motif of Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity it was found that four process types were used. Table 1.5 exhibits the number of process types that are seen to be at play in the speeches under analysis.

Table 1.5

Incidence of Process Types under the motif “Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity.

Types of Process	Number of Process Types	Percentage
Material Process	25	67.56 %
Relational Process	07	18.91%
Verbal Process	04	10.81%
Mental Process	01	2.70%
Existential Process	00	00
Behavioural Process	00	00
Total	37	99.98

Formula:

Total number of each process type under the motif Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity’

$$\frac{\text{Total number of each process type under the motif Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity}}{\text{Total number of all process types under the motif Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity}} \times 100 = \%$$

Total number of all process types under the motif Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity’

Table 1.5 clearly shows that Material, Relational and Verbal Process type constitute most of the process types under the motif of Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity. Material process is used largely i.e. 67.56% which is followed by Relational process that stand at 18.91% and Verbal process at 10.81% and Mental process that is used in the least at 2.70% while Existential and Behavioural Process type are not used.



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Material Process Type

The process type that is used largely under the motif of “Cooperation/Solidarity/ Unity is the Material with the participants as Actor/Goal/Beneficiary where the role and position of west in the ‘Actor’ position is seen to be impactful as it indicates the growth of Middle-East. This feature can be seen in number of Material process types as extracted from the data.

1. Paragraph 6, Clause 4

With our diplomats and civilian advisors in the lead	We	will	Help	Iraqis strengthen institutions that are just, representative and accountable.
Circumstance-Accompaniment(Comitative)	Actor	-	Process-Material	Goal

2. Clause 5

We	Will	build	new ties of trade and commerce, culture and education that unleash the potential of the Iraqi people.
Actor	-	Process-Material	Goal

3. Clause 6



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We	Will	partner	with Iraq that contributes to regional security and peace just as we insist
Actor	-	Process-Material	Goal

4. Clause 1 (b)

We	Might	help	Iraq train and equip its forces again, just as we offer training and assistance to countries around the world.
Actor	-	Process - Material	Beneficiary

5. Paragraph 2 Clause 3(a)

And	we	Spent	enormous blood and treasure	to support	a new government	there
-	Actor	Process – Material	Goal	Process - Material	Goal	Circumstance - Location

6. Paragraph 3 Clause 2(b)

And	Train	Afghan security	to defend	their own
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		forces		country
-	Process Material	Goal	Process- Material	Goal

7. Paragraph 9 Clause 2(a)

We	Strengthen	the Afghan government	And	security force
Actor	Process- Material	Goal	-	Goal

8. Clause 2(b)

That	Reconcile	the Afghan people including the Taliban.
-	Process-Material	Goal

9. Paragraph 10 Clause 5

What	we	Can	do is build	a partnership with the Afghan people that endures – one that we will be able to continue targeting terrorists and supporting a
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				sovereign Afghan government
-	Actor	-	Process Material	Goal

Throughout examples 1-9, Afghanistan and Iraq in the position of Goal are delineated as the ones who might benefit from the measures made by United States. In the examples the verbs ‘help’, ‘partner’, ‘build’, ‘spent’, ‘train’ ‘strengthen’, ‘reconcile’ indicate towards the efforts made by Obama to assist Middle-East in every respect. It is to be noted that in these examples subjective person plural pronoun ‘we’ is used. It is the subject of the clause and is placed in the position of ‘Actor’ which conveys the image of United States as an institution where Obama speaks as a leader and also acts as the initiator of an activity i.e. beginning of healthy relationship with the Middle-East. Hence, here Obama and his country are depicted as the provider of humanitarian help. In the position of ‘Goal’ are Iraq and Afghanistan who benefit from the moves taken by Obama. So in the position of ‘Goal’ are the accomplishments made by the west which are ‘new government’, ‘a partnership with the new government with the Afghan people’. In example 2, ‘build’ is used to with the ‘Goal’ (‘new ties of trade and commerce’) that shows the agenda of Obama for Middle-East of that of growth and development. In other words, Obama promotes unity and engages in developing strategies that ensure security and peace in the Middle-East countries. So, through the Material processes Obama wants to show what his administration (America) has accomplished, and what will they do to hold on to strong power.

Relational Process Type

Relational processes are used in describing some theoretical political concepts/ ideas that are abstract in nature. In the current study, Obama’s discourse revolving around the motif of Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity is represented by the use of Relational processes. It is primarily



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applied to depict political perspectives identified with the collaboration between the two parties. The Relational processes mostly utilized by Obama are identified as Attributive in which the participants involved are Carrier and Attribute. The examples below show the use of Relational processes in the speeches.

1. Paragraph 3, Clause 1

We	Are	in full agreement about how to move forward.	
Carrier	Process - Relational	Attribute	

2. Paragraph 6, Clause 3

This	Will	be	strong and an enduring partnership.
Carrier	-	Process – Relational	Attribute

3. Paragraph 10, Clause 7

Because after a decade of war	the nation that we need to build	is	our own
Circumstance-Cause(Reason)	Carrier	Process - Relational	Attribute



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In example 1, the Relational process ‘are’ indicates that Obama in the role of ‘Carrier’ is committed in establishing peaceful and cordial relations with the Middle-East that would help these states develop. Likewise, in example 2 the abstract concept of ‘enduring partnership’ in the position of Attribute shows that west is set to extend the hand of friendship as partners in the times to come. Similarly, in example 3, ‘We’ in the position of ‘Carrier’ and ‘Our nation’ in the position of Attribute show that Muslim world is a place like America. Through this clausal design Obama strikes the cord of familiarity by labeling Middle-East as his own country thus emphasizing the motif of Cooperation/ Solidarity/ Unity.

Verbal Process Type

Verbal clauses are the ‘clauses of saying’ (Halliday and Matthiessen 252). Under the motif of Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity the Verbal process and the participants ‘Sayer’ and ‘Verbiage’ are identified. The examples that exhibit this motif are shown below.

1. Paragraph 6, Clause 6(b)

Just as	We	insist	that other nations respect Iraq’s sovereignty.
-	Sayer	Process - Verbal	Verbiage

2. Paragraph 7, Clause 1

As	I	Told	Prime Minister, Maliki,	we will continue discussions on how might help Iraq train and equip it forces again, just as we offer training and assistance to countries
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				around the world.
-	Sayer	Peocess - Verbal	Target	Verbiage

3. Paragraph 3, Clause 2

I	Reaffirmed	that United States keeps its commitments.
Sayer	Process - Verbal	Verbiage

4. Clause 1

A few hours ago	I	spoke	with Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki
Circumstance- Temporal	Sayer	Process-Verbal	Receiver

In example 1, 'We' in the position of the 'Sayer' assisted by the Verbal process 'insist' and with the Verbiage 'that other nations respect Iraq's sovereignty' as participant of the clause conveys Obama's strategy to establish and declare Iraq as a sovereign nation i.e. self-governing nation. In example 2, "I " in the position of 'Sayer' accompanied by Verbal process 'told' and another participant 'Prime Minister Maliki' as 'Verbiage' shows the involvement of Obama's administration's interest in creating dialogue with the Prime Minister of Iraq. This type of clause structure is designed to enhance the motif of Cooperation/ Solidarity/Unity. In other words, Obama and his administration are set to invest time and energy in Iraq. Verbs like 'told', 'reaffirmed' and 'spoke' are employed by Obama by positioning himself as 'Sayer' with the first person pronoun 'I'. This type of clausal design is indicative of the fact that he ensures the commitment towards the establishment of peace and also ensures training the military of the Muslim world. Another point that is noted is the use of choices of verbs. Instead of using verbs



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such as ‘informing’ or ‘announcing’ , he uses positive verbs like ‘reaffirmed’, ‘told’ and ‘spoke’ to make his political discourse more emphatic and imbued with positivity thus lending credibility to his discourse and image.

Types of Processes and Participant Roles under the motif “The Removal of U.S military from Iraq and Afghanistan”

Under the motif “The Removal of U.S. military from Iraq and Afghanistan” it was found that three process types were used. Table 1.6 exhibits the incidence of Process types in terms of frequency.

Table 1.6

Incidence of Process Types under the motif “The Removal of U.S. military from Iraq and Afghanistan”

Types of Processes	Number of Process Types	Percentage
Material Process	26	78.7%
Verbal Process	05	15.15%
Relational Process	02	6.06%
Mental Process	00	00
Behavioural Process	00	00
Existential Process	00	00
Total	33	99.91

Formula:

Total number of each process type under the motif of ‘Removal of Troops’

$$\frac{\text{Total number of each process type under the motif of ‘Removal of Troops’}}{\text{Total number of all process types under the motif of ‘Removal of Troops’}} \times 100 = \%$$

Total number of all process types under the motif of ‘Removal of Troops’



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Table 1.6 clearly shows that Material, Verbal and Relational processes constitute major part of the political discourse of Obama under the motif “The Removal of U.S military from Iraq and Afghanistan”. The frequency of Material processes records at 78.7% followed by Verbal processes that stand at 15.15% and Relational process type at 6.06% while Existential and Behavioural processes are not used in the data. The next section deals with the use of each process type and its interpretation.

Material Process Type

The Material Process type is used in bulk at 78.7% under the motif “The Removal of Troops from Iraq and Afghanistan”. This fact can be seen the examples below:

1. Paragraph 2, Clause 3

And	to date	We	have removed	more than 100,000 troops.
-	Circumstance-Temporal	Actor	Process-Material	Goal

2. Paragraph 4, Clause 3

Over the next two months	our troops in Iraq tens of thousands of them	will	pack up	their gear and board convoys for the journey home.
Circumstance-Temporal	Actor	-	Process-Material	Goal



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3. Paragraph 5, Clause 1

We	are starting	this drawdown	from the position of strength.
Actor	Process-Material	Goal	Circumstance-Location

Under the motif of “The Removal of U.S military from Iraq and Afghanistan”, the Material process type is primarily used to portray the west’s social and military assistance provided to the Middle-East. It is noted in the clauses under the motif that only ‘Goal’ as participant is used other than ‘Actor’. In example 1, the Material process “have removed” with the personal pronoun ‘we’ as an ‘Actor’ and the ‘Goal’ ‘more than 100,000 troops’ indicates the strategy of west i.e. the main aim is to establish peace and end the violence from Iraq and Afghanistan. Similarly, in example 2, there are only participants that are in form of ‘Actor’ and ‘Goal’ where in the position of ‘Actor’ is ‘our troops in Iraq’ again conveys the idea that America is the only one who has the potential to help Middle-East in the times of crises. Moreover, the clause indicates that the U.S. troops will no longer be in the country as the verb ‘pack up’ suggests the same. Likewise, in example 4, ‘we’ as an ‘Actor’ accompanied by the verb ‘are starting’ and ‘Goal’ ‘this drawdown’ indicate the policy of liberation that Obama foresees.

Verbal Process Type

Verbal processes under the motif ‘The Removal of U.S. military from Iraq and Afghanistan’ records the frequency of 15.15%. This can be exemplified in the following clauses extracted from the data.

1. Paragraph 1, Clause 1

I	Pledged	to bring the war in Iraq to a responsible end for the sake of our national security and to strengthen American leadership
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		around the world
Sayer	Process-Verbal	Verbiage

2. Clause 2

After taking office,	I	announced	a new strategy that would end our combat mission in Iraq and remove all our troops by the end of 2011.
CircumstanceTemporal	Sayer	Process-Verbal	Verbiage

3. Paragraph 4, Clause 1

So	today	I	can	Report	that as promised the rest of our troops in Iraq will come home by the end of next year.
-	Circumstance-Temporal	Sayer	-	Process-Verbal	Verbiage

Throughout examples, 1-3, 'I' as first person pronoun and in the position of 'Sayer' is seen. This implies Obama's intention of withdrawing U.S. military from Middle-East (Verbiage). The use of 'announced' 'report' is the wise choice chosen in verbs because the purpose of these verbs is informing the people of Iraq and not dictating them. This strategy employed by Obama helps



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establish the element of credibility in the speeches. In all the examples ‘Verbiage’ hints at removing forces from these countries hence the motif is justified in the clauses.

Relational Process Type

Relational processes under the motif “The Removal of U.S. military from Iraq and Afghanistan” stands in terms of frequency at 6.06% thus having least number of clauses assigned to the motif. The examples are shown below with the interpretation.

1. Paragraph 2, Clause 1

As Commander-in Chief	ensuring the success of this strategy	has been	one of my highest national security priorities
Circumstance-Role	Carrier	Process-Relational	Attribute

2. Paragraph 4, Clause 2

After nearly nine years	America’s war	In Iraq	will	be	over
Circumstance-Temporal	Carrier	Circumstance-Location	-	Process-Relational	Attribute



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Under the motif of ‘The Removal of Troops from Iraq and Afghanistan’, Relational process type is applied particularly to define the U.S. policy goals and strategies in Middle-East. The ‘Carrier’ of the clauses is ‘ensuring success of this strategy’ and ‘America’s war’ that are targeted on Attributes ‘one of the highest national security priorities’ and ‘over’ with the use of auxiliary verbs ‘be’ and ‘are’. This implies that Obama does not want to indulge in mindless conflict as he once stated that his administration has over-invested in Iraq. Moreover, through these clauses he wants that people of Middle-East should trust the western administration in improving the security of the region.

Conclusion

The current study explored the Experiential Metafunction through the system of Transitivity. The study helped identify the motifs prevalent in the two speeches that Obama addressed. Based on the experiential metafunction, the data exhibited that Material Processes occupy the vast majority of clauses in each of the two motifs. The findings also revealed the most recurred and addressed motifs were ‘Cooperation/Solidarity/Unity’ and ‘The Removal of U.S Military from Iraq and Afghanistan’.

Most of the Material processes in the motifs illustrate the concrete actions taken by west for Middle-East in the form of assistance given to Middle-East whether it is strengthening their military or building strong ties or partnering with them. The political discourse is highly dominant with the Material process types it finds parallel with the research conducted by Marek Hampl(2014), Naz, Alvi and Albaser(2011). The clauses used contained role of west and Obama and his administration in the position of Actor/Sayer/Carrier in the respective clauses. And in the position of Goal/Verbiage/Attribute is the actions and accomplishments achieved by west and Obama’s administration and Beneficiary is the Islamic world who is benefited from the measures made by Obama.

The use of Verbal processes used by Obama in the political discourse is mainly used to provide information on the issues that are being addressed rather than sharing phrases or quotations or citations from other people. This corresponds with the study conducted by Liping



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who claimed that having certain percentage of verbal processes in the political discourse is reasonable as one of the characteristic features is dissemination of information.

The use of Relational processes in the speeches is represented mainly by Attributive type. This kind of representation conveys specific characteristics identified with the subject of cooperation and unity and also define abstract political concepts.

Thus, through this investigation it was discovered how experiential meaning contributes to show Obama's perspective on the issues faced by Middle-East. The portrayal of Obama's perspectives was realised through diverse Process types and Participant roles.

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