

The Linguistic Construction of Atticus Finch's Character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: A Transitivity Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the linguistic construction of Atticus Finch's characterization in the courtroom scenes of *To Kill a Mockingbird* through the transitivity system of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, 65 clauses involving Atticus Finch were analyzed to identify dominant process types and participant roles. The findings reveal that verbal processes overwhelmingly dominate the data (55 out of 65 clauses), positioning Atticus primarily as a Sayer. This distribution indicates that his character is constructed largely through speech rather than physical action. Three central traits emerge: incisive, principled, and compassionate. His incisiveness is realized through structured and analytical questioning; his principled nature is reinforced through verbal, material, and behavioral processes; and his compassion is expressed through verbal, relational, and mental processes. The study demonstrates that characterization is not only a literary device but also a linguistic phenomenon constructed through patterned experiential meanings. Transitivity analysis thus provides a systematic framework for examining how language encodes moral identity in literary texts.

Keywords: characterization, transitivity, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Atticus Finch, courtroom discourse

1. Introduction

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains one of the most influential American novels addressing racial injustice, moral courage, and ethical responsibility in the twentieth century. Set in the racially segregated American South, the narrative presents Atticus Finch as a lawyer who defends Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of assaulting a white woman. Within this socio-historical context, Atticus emerges as a central moral figure whose actions challenge dominant racial prejudice. His character functions as the ethical anchor of the novel, embodying justice, rationality, fairness, and empathy in a community structured by discrimination. Scholarly discussions of Atticus Finch frequently interpret him through ethical, philosophical, political, or psychological frameworks. Many studies highlight his moral courage, liberal humanism, and paternal guidance, often emphasizing his role as a symbol of integrity within an unjust legal system. However, while these approaches provide valuable thematic insights, they tend to focus on ideological interpretation rather than

linguistic construction. In other words, Atticus is commonly described as principled or compassionate, yet fewer studies systematically examine how these traits are realized through the grammatical patterns of the text itself. This gap suggests the need for a linguistic approach that moves beyond thematic labeling toward structural analysis.

Characterization theory supports the importance of such an approach. Abrams (1999) [1] explains that characters are revealed through what they say, what they do, and how they interact with others. Traits are often constructed indirectly rather than explicitly stated by the narrator. Readers infer personality and morality from patterns of speech and action embedded within the narrative. Because literary characters are linguistically constructed entities, analyzing the grammatical structures that represent their actions and speech can offer a more systematic understanding of characterization.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity system, provides a powerful framework for examining how experience is encoded in clause structure [2]. Transitivity categorizes experiential meaning into six process types: material (processes of doing), mental (processes of sensing), relational (processes of being and having), behavioral (physiological and psychological behavior), verbal (processes of saying), and existential (processes of existing). Each process type assigns participant roles such as Actor, Senser, Sayer, Carrier, or Existent that structure how individuals are represented within discourse. Through repeated patterns of process selection and participant positioning, texts construct particular images of characters.

Applying transitivity analysis to courtroom discourse is particularly relevant because legal settings rely heavily on structured speech acts, interrogation, argumentation, and persuasion. In courtroom scenes, identity and authority are constructed primarily through language rather than physical action. Therefore, examining how Atticus functions grammatically, whether predominantly as Sayer, Actor, or Senser that can reveal how his moral and intellectual authority is linguistically encoded. By focusing on clause-level representation, this study shifts the analysis of Atticus from thematic description to grammatical construction.

This study addresses two research questions:

1. What transitivity processes are most frequently associated with Atticus Finch in the courtroom scenes?
2. How do these processes contribute to constructing his character traits?

By analyzing the distribution and function of transitivity processes in selected courtroom clauses, this research demonstrates that Atticus's moral identity is not merely implied narratively but systematically constructed through patterned grammatical choices. In doing so, the study contributes to literary linguistics by showing that characterization can be examined as a linguistic phenomenon grounded in experiential meaning.

2. Literary Review

Previous scholarship has examined Atticus Finch from various perspectives, including racial politics, moral philosophy, masculinity, and empathy. However, most studies interpret his character thematically rather than linguistically. Characterization theory (Abrams, 1999; Murphy, 1972) emphasizes that traits emerge through speech and action [3]. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) conceptualizes language as a resource for meaning-making.

Within SFL, the transitivity system explains how clauses represent experience through processes and participant roles (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Verbal processes encode acts of saying; material processes encode actions; mental processes encode cognition and emotion; relational processes encode identification and attribution. Applying transitivity analysis to literary characterization allows traits to be examined through patterned grammatical choices rather than impressionistic interpretation. This study extends prior literary analyses by demonstrating how linguistic structures systematically construct character identity.

3. Methods

This research uses a descriptive-qualitative method. Descriptive research aims to describe and interpret phenomena systematically [4], while qualitative analysis allows deeper interpretation of textual data [5]. The primary data source is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, specifically selected courtroom scenes involving Atticus Finch. The data consist of 65 clauses containing Atticus's dialogue and narrative descriptions. The analysis procedure includes:

1. Identifying clauses related to Atticus Finch.
2. Classifying each clause based on Halliday and Matthiessen's transitivity categories.
3. Determining participant roles such as Actor, Sayer, Senser, Carrier, and others.
4. Interpreting how dominant process types contribute to characterization.

Special attention was given to verbal processes, particularly the roles of Sayer and Verbiage, because Atticus frequently appears as Sayer. The analysis focused primarily on the Verbiage (content of speech), as it provides direct evidence of his moral reasoning and intellectual stance. After classification, frequency patterns were examined to identify dominant processes and interpret how they contribute to characterization.

4. Discussion

4.1 Distribution of Transitivity Processes

Out of the 65 clauses analyzed in this study, verbal processes overwhelmingly dominate the data, occurring 55 times. In contrast, relational and material processes each appear only three times, existential processes occur twice, and mental and behavioral processes are found once respectively. This distribution clearly indicates that Atticus Finch is predominantly represented through verbal processes, positioning him primarily as a Sayer within the courtroom discourse. The strong dominance of speech-based clauses suggests that his character is constructed more through language and argumentation than through physical action or internal reflection. Based on these patterned representations, three major traits emerge from the analysis: Atticus is linguistically constructed as incisive through his structured and logical questioning, principled through consistent ethical positioning, and compassionate through respectful and empathetic verbal expression.

4.1.1 Incisive Trait

Atticus's incisiveness is realized almost entirely through verbal processes. He consistently functions as Sayer during cross-examinations, producing structured and logically sequenced questions. His interrogatives narrow testimony, expose contradictions, and emphasize factual precision. Rather than using confrontational language, he relies on calm and analytical questioning. This linguistic strategy reflects intellectual sharpness and

disciplined reasoning. The coherence and progression of his questions demonstrate that incisiveness is not merely thematic but grammatically encoded through patterned verbal processes.

4.1.2 *Principled Trait*

The principled trait is constructed through a combination of verbal, material, and behavioral processes. His verbal expressions emphasize fairness and adherence to legal procedure. Material processes represent his professional actions in defending his client responsibly. Behavioral processes show restraint and composure in tense courtroom situations. These linguistic choices portray Atticus as ethically consistent and morally grounded. Together, these processes portray Atticus as ethically consistent. His principles are not abstract values but are realized linguistically through measured speech and disciplined behavior.

4.1.3 *Compassionate Trait*

Compassion appears through verbal, relational, and mental processes. In addressing witnesses, Atticus uses respectful language and controlled tone. Relational processes describe him as calm and considerate. Although he must expose painful truths, his language avoids humiliation or aggression. This balance between professional duty and empathy demonstrates that compassion is integrated into his communicative style. His speech preserves dignity while pursuing justice. This balance demonstrates empathy integrated with professional responsibility.

4.2 *Language and Indirect Characterization*

The analysis reveals that Atticus's traits are constructed indirectly. The narrator rarely labels him explicitly as incisive or principled. Instead, these traits emerge through patterned grammatical structures, particularly verbal processes. The dominance of speech-based clauses confirms that his moral strength lies in persuasion and reasoned argumentation.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Atticus Finch's characterization in the courtroom scenes is linguistically constructed through patterned transitivity choices. The dominance of verbal processes positions him as a figure whose strength lies in speech rather than force. His incisiveness is encoded through analytical questioning; his principles are reflected in disciplined verbal and behavioral patterns; and his compassion is expressed through respectful and empathetic language.

By applying transitivity analysis, this study contributes to literary linguistics by showing that character identity can be systematically examined through grammatical structures. Characterization, therefore, is both a literary and a linguistic phenomenon, constructed through experiential meanings embedded in clause structure.

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