

# Analysis of Children's Picture Book from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar—A Case Study of *The Coronavirus Fight*

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**Abstract:** *The Coronavirus Fight* is a well-made children's picture book about epidemic publicity. This article attempts to analyze the text message from the perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). For ideational function, this book uses the material, relational and behavior process the most. The heavy use of the transitivity process vividly depicts the epidemic situation. For interpersonal function, most sentences use declarative mood, which indicates that this book aims to express much more information to the readers. Furthermore, a large amount of the first person also bridges the void between the writer and reader. The analysis of the text reveals well the meaning which the story conveys: although the coronavirus does harm to human health, our country is taking effective measures to prevent it, and we should believe we will fight against it one day.

**Keywords:** *The Coronavirus Fight*; Children's picture book; Ideational function; Interpersonal function

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## 1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of novel coronavirus pneumonia in late 2019, China has suffered from tremendous trauma on international health security. To raise awareness of the public, epidemic prevention brochures, advertising maps, slogans and children's picture books about COVID-19 surge up. Especially children's picture books, which provide an opportunity for the young children to know more information about the pandemic and appeal to all children to take an active part in epidemic prevention and control. *The Coronavirus Fight*, written by a famous English educator, Zhang Shuo and her team, has been regarded as a public picture book and has been widely spread among children. By analyzing the text content with the qualitative research method, this article aims to analyze the characteristics of this book and figure out the following two questions: (1) What is the theme of the book? (2) How ideational and interpersonal functions are realized in the book?

## 2. Data collection

The corpus originates from a children's picture book--*The Coronavirus Fight*. It contains 59 sentences, 486 words in total. The 28-page book tells a story about the novel coronavirus in the first person. The leading role, a young girl, is told to cancel her holiday trip due to the epidemic. By her mother's detailed explanation, the girl learns what the coronavirus is, why it breaks out and how to prevent it. Finally, the mother tells the girl that the government is taking action to control the epidemic, and they believe China will fight against it.

Picture book is one of the best reading materials for children to read, for they are conducive to cultivate young children's discriminating ability, survival ability and establish correct value view (Li 2021:19). Since the public picture book came out in 2020, it has been widely spread on websites. *The Coronavirus Fight* gets attention for its large amount of video playback and reading groups. The text is the core part to convey information in the book. Therefore, the text content of the book will be the research object in this paper.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

The analytic approach is Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) which is put forward by Halliday in 1976. SFG is widely applied in the field of politics, economy, culture and society (Li Zhanzi, 2020:1; Zhang Delu, 2018; Huang Guowen, 2020). And it consists of two parts: systemic grammar and functional grammar. The former aims to explain the internal relations in language as a system network, while the latter tries to reveal that language is a means of social interaction (Halliday:2004). In this paper, functional grammar will be analyzed in detail. According to Halliday, ideational and interpersonal functions are indispensable in functional grammar. Ideational function is to convey new information which is unknown to the hearer. When we use language to describe the external world or the internal world, we tend to depend on the experiential function of the language (Halliday 1994:106; Thompson 1996:76). The transitivity system is an important content in ideational function. Interpersonal function means language can express social and personal relations. It is mainly reflected by mood, modality, voice, personal pronouns, etc. With specific examples, transitivity system, mood and personal pronouns will be discussed in this paper.

Halliday divided the transitivity system into six sub-types: material, relational, verbal, mental, behavioral and existential process.

Material process means a process of doing, and it is usually represented by dynamic verbs, actor and goal. Mental process is a process of sensing including perception, reaction and cognition, etc. Mental process has two elements: sensor and phenomenon. Relational process is a process of being, and it can be divided into two parts: identifying and attributive. Behavioral process is a process of physiological and psychological behavior, like coughing, smiling, dreaming, etc. Verbal process is a process of information changing by talking, and it often includes “say”, “tell”, “talk” and “praise”. Existential process shows that something exists or happens (Hu et al, 2008:74-84).

Interpersonal function reflects the interpersonal relationship of people of different social statuses. Halliday’s holds that mood analysis could better reveal the interpersonal relationships among participants through the choice of mood. Mood is determined by subject and infinite element, and it has three sub-types: declarative, interrogative and imperative mood. It is important to note that exclamatory sentence belongs to the declarative mood (Halliday: 2004).

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1 Data Analysis

After the statistics of the corpus, the results are as follows. The table below is the distribution of frequency and percentage of each process in the picture book. Among the six processes, material, relational and mental process account for 47.3%, 17.2% and 12.9% respectively. The three types of process will be analyzed in detail.

Table 1: Distribution of transitivity system

Process	material	relational	mental	behavioral	verbal	existential	total
Number	44	16	12	9	9	3	93
Percentage	47.3%	17.2%	12.9%	9.7%	9.7%	3.2%	100%

Material process is the most common process, almost accounting for half of the total. In the text, the material process focuses on “doing something”, most process concentrates on people’s action on prevention and control about the epidemic. For example:

- (1) If we wear masks, wash our hands, and stay away from sick people...
- (2) Many brave doctors and nurses are helping sick people.
- (3) Construction workers are building a new hospital.
- (4) Janitors are helping to clean the walls, door handles, and floors.
- (5) Drivers are transporting food and medical supplies to people who need help.

Above examples show that humans are fighting against the coronavirus outbreak, indicating Chinese people’s unity and China’s determination to defeat the catastrophic event. The material process describes Chinese people’s actions objectively. Now that everyone spares no efforts to prevent the crisis, children also need to stay at home and prevent themselves from being infected. The effective measures play a role in persuading children not to be anxious about the epidemic and keep confidence in the bright future.

In *The Coronavirus Fight*, relational process occurs 16 times. Relational process includes attributive and identifying. Most process in the book belongs to attributive, pointing out the properties of the entity. Here are some examples:

- (1)...there is a virus that looks like my sticky ball.
- (2)It is called the coronavirus.
- (3)...they are both very tiny
- (4)They are very light and can travel in the air too.

These examples depict the characteristics of COVID-19. The link verbs, like “is” and “are”, reflect people’s interpretation of the entity. The virus is named as coronavirus, and it is tiny and light in nature. These expressions help children learn the basic information about coronavirus.

The mental process ranks the third place in transitivity system, accounting for 12.9%. In the process, the majority of clauses are expressions of the young girl’s attitude towards the coronavirus crisis. Examples are as follows:

- (1)I don’t know why we have to stay at home
- (2)I’m sorry we had to cancel our trip, but we have to be cautious.”
- (3)Will we die too? I’m scared.
- (4)I feel much better now.

These examples directly reflect the girl’s changing attitude towards the pandemic, from the fear of unknown to the acceptance of the new things. In the process, the sensor is almost “I”, which shows the child’s liking and disliking of things. The subjective affection that expresses in the book reveals the character disposition of the young child and strikes a chord with the readers.

In mood system, the high or low frequency of certain mood structures in specific circumstances could be an effective mode of prominence, then producing a stylistic effect.

Table 2: Distribution of mood types in the text

Mood Types	declarative	interrogative	imperative	total
Amount	54	4	1	59
Percentage	91.5%	6.8%	1.7%	100%

From table 2, we know that there are 59 instances of mood. Most of them are declarative sentences, constituting 91.5% of the total. Interrogative sentences take the second place with 4 instances, accounting for 6.8%. It is quite clear that the proportion of

declarative is extraordinarily larger than the other two, which reveals that making statements of fact is the main function of the book. The purpose of the picture book is to offer information about the virus to the children. All interrogative sentences are put forward by the young girl:

- (1) It is sticky, right?
- (2) How does it make people sick?
- (3) What will happen to those sick people?
- (4) Will we die too?

A series of questions depict children’s confusion about the epidemic, the mother’s answer makes the girl master the key information about the coronavirus. The interrogative mood reflects the child’s curiosity about unknown things. In essence, it here performs the same function as the declarative mood.

Interpersonal function is not only reflected mood, modality and tone, but also reflected by pronoun. Personal pronoun can also show status and establish relationship (Li Zhanzi, 2002:124). Personal pronoun varies according to the genre of the text.

Table 3: Distribution of personal pronouns

<b>Pronoun use</b>	<b>first person</b>	<b>second person</b>	<b>third person</b>	<b>total</b>
<b>Number</b>	33	2	15	50
<b>Percentage</b>	66%	4%	30%	100%

Table 3 reveals that the first person is used with the highest frequency, accounting for 67%. The picture book is designed for children, using the first person shows the close relationships and bridges the void between the writer and reader.

but I know I should still be careful.

I don’t know why we have to stay at home.

I hide in my blanket

I’m sorry we had to cancel our trip, but we have to be cautious.

If we wear masks, wash our hands, and stay away from sick people, we will be okay.

In the book, first-person pronouns are mainly composed of “I” and “we”. The use of “I” depicts a scenario: the young girl shares the bad news about coronavirus crisis with her friends. The intimate relationships between the young girl and other children are constructed. Early in 2016, Pan points out that “designing the plot from the perspective of adult and lacking the childlike interest are the challenge of domestic children’s picture books (Pan Mingge, 2016:33).” The narrative is the first person, which makes the story more authentic and vivid. The using of “we” is intended to call upon people to take an active part in the epidemic prevention together. We are as a whole to contribute to our society.

## 4.2 Discussion

For the main content of the picture book, it can be divided into three parts: the nature and trait of the coronavirus, personal preventive measures to the coronavirus and the remedial measures taken by people from all walks of life. On the one hand, all language is used to convey the information to the reader. There are 59 sentences in the book, and each sentence is no more than ten words. These simple sentences and concise language are accordance with the child’s language level and they are conducive to the children to master the epidemic information by themselves. One the other hand, the language constructs an exemplary national image to the public. There are 9 sentences depicting people’s performance to epidemic crisis, for instance, “working on new medicines”, “doctors and nurses are helping sick people”, etc. These expressions make up one-fifth of the text, which demonstrates convincingly that the nation is unceasingly exploring new methods to fight against the crisis. Human action strengthens people’s confidence to win the coronavirus battle.

For the organization of the picture book, the story reflects three stages of emotional changes. At first, the young girl is in low spirits for her holiday trip is canceled. After knowing the strange pandemic will get people sick, the girl feels upset and scared. Seeking news on television, the girl realizes that numerous people are saving the country. Then she becomes calm and optimistic about the epidemic battle. The changeable spirits conform to the personality of all young children, expressing emotion intuitively.

In this regard, the writer has built up an endearing image of a child and set up a close relationship with the reader. For the theme and significance of the picture book, this book makes great achievements in disseminating epidemic information, advising the children to make defense to the epidemic, assisting them in getting rid of anxiety and building up confidence about the future. Regarding the title of the book—*The Coronavirus Fight*, it is easy to remind people of the cruelty of the fight. However, in the book, the writer doesn’t mention any dreadful aspects of coronavirus, on the contrary, the description of the preventive measures takes up much space. In this aspect, the writer tries to protect the inner world for the children and encourage them to believe in the bright future.

In short, every part sticks closely to the theme of the book. This text with simple words and sentences makes the children know about the coronavirus crisis. Portray of the current epidemic situation shows Chinese people’s determination to overcome the disaster. Just as the last sentence in the book: one day, everything will be all right. This is the writer’s faith in the nation as well. Meanwhile, the book builds a positive image of a developing country. Facing cataclysmic events, our country always stands up and safeguards his people.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes three transitivity processes with high frequency in the book: material, relational and mental process. The mood system and personal pronoun are as well as discussed. A large amount of material process and declarative mood exert an effect

on expressing and communicating the information, and the use of the first person builds up a close relationship between the writer and reader. It can be found that the writer well achieves her goals through the book: informing the children of the horrible and risky pandemic, providing the children with safe and effective prevention measures, calming the children and encouraging them to firmly believe that our country will win out in the battle.

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