

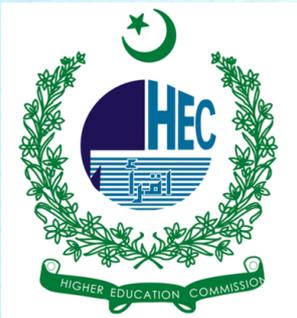
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**Verbal Voice as a Meaning-Making Resource in Political Forums:
A Systemic Functional Linguistic Analysis**



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Abstract

To investigate how speakers' voices contribute to the construction of meaning in online political forums, this research employs the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Instead of seeing voice as a simple active/passive dichotomy, the approach reframes it as a complex semiotic system where transitivity, agency, and ideological representation combine. An 85,000-word corpus of transcripts from various political contexts, including legislative debates and televised political conversations, is used in the research. In order to legitimize institutions, assign blame, and establish ideological stances, the research shows that political actors purposefully alter voice through construction, concealment, and negotiation of agency. Hallidayan transitivity analysis, voice categorization, and agent deletion procedures form the basis of its qualitative interpretative method. When claiming credit or demonstrating decision-making skills, people frequently use active voice formulations. Speakers, on the other hand, use passive or middle voice constructions to make the outcomes of contested policies seem inevitable or normal. An in-depth grammatical analysis of semiotic power bargaining in democratic deliberative environments is provided by this research, which expands the field of political discourse studies. By showing how voice interacts with ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions in political speech all at once, it expands SFL theory as well.

Keywords: *Verbal Voice, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Transitivity, Political Discourse, Agency, Passive Constructions, Ideological Positioning, Metafunction*

Introduction

Theorizing voice grammar has been popular in the field of language study for quite some time. When it comes to applied discourse study, nevertheless, the distinction between active and passive voice is typically scrutinized. Voice has vast semiotic capacity to shape text flow, govern interpersonal relations, and generate experiences; nevertheless, this binary framing, while useful in the classroom, masks this potential. According to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), voice is more than just a reorganization of syntactic elements; it's a system for making meaning that's connected to the ideational metafunction, specifically the transitivity system, which sees the clause as a manifestation of experience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). With each choice they make within the voice system, speakers and writers alter the experience structure of a clause to reflect agency, responsibility, and causality.

The seminal work on transitivity by Halliday (1994) places voice within the larger ergative structure of the English phrase. Unlike the transitive model, which emphasizes the roles of actor and goal, this model places more emphasis on the roles of agent and medium. Choosing a voice, in this view, comprises more than just identifying the "doer"; it also necessitates investigating whether a process is shown to have been initiated by an outside source (the Agent) or if it seems to have arisen naturally through a medium (the Medium). According to this ergative viewpoint, voice is a representational agency system that significantly affects the decision-making process in discourse regarding events, acts, and states of things. The "operative" and "receptive" voices in SFL span a broader spectrum of meaning than

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the traditional active/passive dichotomy (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In this model, the agent acts as the subject and the medium as the receptor.

The ideological significance of one's voice is most apparent in political discourse, when the act of expressing one's agency and responsibility is intrinsically political and reflects power relations at work (Fairclough, 1989, 2003). Competing actors utilize language to negotiate public accountability, develop institutional credibility, and fight for ideological territory in political situations such as legislative debates, televised political discussions, or campaign events. For example, according to Fowler et al. (1979) and Fowler (1991), there is a purpose to using one's voice in these contexts: constructions that are active place an emphasis on political agents and the positive outcomes they bring about, while constructions that are passive or agentless downplay or eliminate responsibility for problematic or negative occurrences.

Despite the acknowledged ideological relevance of voice in discourse, there is a notable lack of research that utilizes a comprehensive Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework to analyze voice in political forum contexts. According to the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) school of thought, which has dominated studies of political discourse voice (van Dijk, 1993, 2001; Fairclough, 1995), passive constructs serve to obfuscate and deflect ideas. Although these studies have yielded useful insights, they frequently ignore the context of transitivity and focus solely on voice when analyzing grammar. Not only that, but passivization has been the exclusive focus of this research, with other variables connected to transitivity, such as process type, contextual factors, middle voice, and ergative constructions, being ignored.

Political forum discourse, which includes adversarial questioning, public inspection, and spontaneous verbal decisions in the midst of real-time participation, has also been understudied (e.g., Bilal, 2012; Ong'onda, 2016). Previous research has largely concentrated on written political texts, such as newspaper editorials, policy papers, and speeches. Because they bring politics into the open, promote conversation, and welcome both prepared and unprepared remarks, political forums are ideal settings for voice analysis. They also have real-world and political implications for people's understanding of agency.

In order to fill a gap in the literature, this study applies Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to analyze vocal tone in online political forums. This investigation delves deeper than a simple tally of passive components. This study delves into the workings of the complete voice system in various processes, focusing on how the active and passive voices, middle voice constructions, agentless passives, and grammatical metaphors can be used to completely avoid the voice system. Two research questions and their associated objectives serve as the compass for this examination.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do political actors in forum discourse deploy the voice system—including operative, receptive, and middle voice constructions—to construe, foreground, or suppress agency in the representation of political events and policy outcomes?

RQ2: In what ways does voice interact with other transitivity variables (process type, participant roles, circumstances) and across metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, textual) to serve ideological positioning and accountability management in political forums?

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Research Objectives

Objective 1: To identify and categorise the patterns of voice selection—operative, receptive, middle, and grammatical metaphorical alternatives—in political forum discourse, and to analyse how these patterns construe, foreground, or suppress agency in representations of political events and policy outcomes.

Objective 2: To examine the interaction of voice with other transitivity variables and across metafunctions, elucidating how voice functions as a multifunctional semiotic resource for ideological positioning and accountability management in political forums.

Significance of the Study

There are three related areas where this study adds to what is already known. By demonstrating the benefits of a holistic strategy for voice analysis that incorporates ergative and transitive models, along with the interaction between voice and other transitivity systems, this study strengthens the theoretical foundation of SFL research. This research lays the groundwork for future studies on the role of voice in public political speech, with implications for a wide range of institutional and cultural settings. This procedure can be repeated. The text provides valuable insights into the ways political actors navigate the tensions between self-interest, institutional legitimization, and transparency through the use of grammar. It also discusses the linguistic management of democratic accountability in political discourse. This research responds to Halliday's (1990) request for linguistics to be more widely used in order to analyze social problems and institutional language, with a focus on the semiotic function of voice in contexts when lives are on the line.

Literature Review

Transitivity, Voice, and the Clause as Representation

The idea of transitivity proposed by Halliday (1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, 2014) is a strong theoretical basis for our investigation. The grammatical system of transitivity in SFL influences the ideational metafunction at the level of the phrase. According to this idea, a clause is similar to a "quantum of change" consisting of a process, the people who are a part of or impacted by the process, and the circumstances around it. Material, mental, relational, behavioral, linguistic, and existential processes all examine different aspects of experience depending on the participants' responsibilities. This method relies on speech to connect grammatical functions (subject, complement) with semantic roles (agent, medium, beneficiary), particularly with material and related process types.

The uniqueness of Halliday's paradigm lies in its two additional transitivity models, the transitive model and the ergative model. The former emphasizes the process of transitioning from an actor to a goal, while the latter highlights the role of the agent in this transition. The ergative model is the pinnacle of voice system advancement. Here, the congruence of the clause's thematic and informational frameworks with the instigation and causality is a major consideration. This is all that remains when deciding between the operative voice (agent as subject) and the receptive voice (medium as subject) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, paragraphs 334–346). Voice is more than just a syntactic decision; it's a true semantic choice that alters how people think about responsibility, agency, and causality. This dual-model method demonstrates this particularly well.

Two authors who have made these systems accessible are Thompson (2014) and Eggins (2004). The work of Martin et al. (1997) advances transitivity analysis by demonstrating how consistent patterns of transitivity choice inside and across text sections generate consistent accounts of experience. The field of political discourse research gains a direct advantage from these extensions since the ideological weight of a speaker's cumulative pattern of voice choices across their contributions can be comparable to that of a single clause-level pick.

In practical discourse studies, the topic of the difference between ergative and transitive viewpoints on voice has received little attention, despite its importance. According to the voice, one of the two main grammatical oppositions in the transitive model—the actor or the goal—must be chosen as the subject. Based on the divergence between the agent and the medium, the ergative model assigns the following roles to each: operative (agent as subject), receptive (medium as subject with the agent demoted or removed), and middle (medium alone with no agent at all). According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the transitive model is split into two sections by the ergative model and into three sections by the receptive and intermediate models. Observing the active/passive distinction in isolation fails to reveal a unique ideological tactic exemplified by middle voice formulations, in which events seem to happen regardless of external causes. Therefore, the examination of political discourse relies heavily on this tripartite differentiation.

Additionally, a crucial part of the textual metafunction—the relationship between voice and theme organization—has been mostly disregarded in discourse-analytical uses of SFL. The choice of voice immediately affects the commencement of the clause, according to Thompson (2014), because in English declarative sentences, choosing the subject always means choosing the theme. The speaker assumes the position of the Medium when they use receptive voice and the Agent when they use operative voice. Due to this thematic domino effect, voice functions in two ways: first, ideationally, by establishing agency, and second, textually, by organizing the flow of information. The structure and reception of political discourse are significantly impacted by this metafunctional synergy.

Agency, Ergativity, and Grammatical Metaphor

Social theoretical and SFLian conceptions of agency are distinct, despite their close relationship in discourse analysis. As a component of the Process + Medium core combination, the Agent initiates a process in Halliday's ergative model. 'By' phrases in passive voice are an example of a basic grammatical component that features the agent, its location, or its indirect contextual function (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Furthering his analysis of the ergative model, Davidse (1992) argues that ergativity in English is a grammaticalization of causality that is essential to comprehending how speakers describe events as happening either on their own or due to outside forces.

The study of agency and voice gains another dimension with the suggestion of grammatical metaphor by Halliday (1994) and its further elaboration by Halliday and Matthiessen (1999). Although they are often verbs, processes that have undergone nominalization are reassembled as groups rather than in the voice system. When political actors use phrases like "The implementation of reforms was necessary" rather than "We implemented reforms" or "Reforms were implemented (by us)" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999), the grammatical metaphor serves multiple purposes. Furthermore, it transforms the procedure from an occurrence to an object. It is this

feature that has a direct impact on political forum analysis; it is recognized as a sign of institutional and bureaucratic language (Martin, 1993b; Iedema, 1997).

Voice and Ideology in Political Discourse

It was within the critical linguistics tradition that the ideological relevance of grammatical voice was initially highlighted. According to Fowler et al. (1979) and Kress and Hodge (1979), the media and institutional discourse use passive constructions and nominalizations to hide who is responsible for what and to legitimize specific social reality representations. Speakers and writers may use voice as a "transformational" tool to conceal or eliminate actors for ideological motives, according to Fowler (1991), who elaborated on this theory.

Textual methods that discursively establish and perpetuate power relations within CDA, according to Fairclough, include passivization and nominalization (1989, 1995, 2003). Similarly, according to Van Dijk (1993, 2001), in political and media discourse, minimizing agency serves to perpetuate domination by diverting focus from the individuals accountable for contentious societal acts. Some have argued that CDA methods are flawed because they reduce grammatical elements to mere ideological reflections (Bartley, 2018; O'Grady, 2019). They fail to adequately consider the paradigmatic and systemic features of grammatical choice that are emphasized by SFL. For this reason, CDA studies of passivization haven't always included voice choices in the complete system network of transitivity, which makes it easy to misunderstand or disregard alternative grammatical strategies, such as middle voice or grammatical metaphor, that could serve the same ideological purpose.

Patterns of transitivity in political speeches and writings have been the subject of a great deal of research in the field of SFL-informed political discourse. Two studies that examined transitivity in political speeches were Bilal (2012) and Ong'onda (2016). Bilal sought to identify trends in the placement of agents in the foreground and background, while Ong'onda examined political discourse in Kenya. By comparing the depictions of the same events by competing political actors through various process types and participant configurations, Lillian (2008) performed a transitivity analysis of ideological struggle in legislative discourse. Voice has not received much analytical attention in these investigations, which have mostly focused on the distribution of process types and participant roles.

Responsibility, Accountability, and Institutional Discourse

Research on political accountability has increasingly acknowledged the role of language strategies in shaping the allocation of blame. In his extensive framework for the analysis of political discourse, Chilton (2004) takes into account the ways in which representational choices interact with temporal, geographical, and modal positioning to establish political legitimacy. Using the grammatical resources of speech, Van Leeuwen (1996, 2008) identified tactics like impersonalization, abstraction, backgrounding, and exclusion that operate to either reconfigure or inhibit agency in his groundbreaking sociosemantic paradigm for the depiction of social actors.

According to Iedema (1997) and Iedema et al. (1994), 'administrative objectivity' is created in policy documents and bureaucratic texts by methodically using nominalization and passivization in institutional speech. Instead of being the product of individual decisions, institutional activities are portrayed as cold and inevitable.

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The use of linguistic metaphor in institutional contexts leads to "technicality," as Martin (1993b) showed, and this prevents non-experts from making significant contributions to policy meetings. Particularly relevant to political settings are these arguments about the unique discursive tension that arises from the conflict between democratic accountability (that is, the need for honest and open responsibility allocation) and institutional self-preservation (that is, the need to suppress responsibility).

This research contributes to these varied and interrelated areas by providing an analysis of voice in political forum debate that is guided by SFL. The dialogic, adversarial, and publicly responsible nature of this situation presents unique analytical challenges and opportunities, but it has received insufficient attention in the literature. Also, we must not forget to mention the corpus-based quantitative research on passive constructions in political discourse. According to studies conducted by Biber et al. (1999), the passive voice is more commonly used in formal and political settings than in daily conversation. While beneficial, distributional findings typically fall short of providing the type of in-depth semantic and functional analysis offered by SFL. Counting the number of passive voice clauses in a political text doesn't tell us anything about the people or processes being left out, the changes being made to the structure, or the ideological weight of these grammar choices. In light of this shortcoming, the current study integrates corpus-informed distributional analysis with comprehensive qualitative systemic functional linguistics (SFL) analysis to conduct wide and profound investigations into political discourse.

The point where SFL and CDA meet is still the subject of much fruitful, though potentially contentious, discussion. Although they approach the topic from different angles, both ideologies acknowledge the ideological significance of word choice. According to Fairclough (2003) and O'Grady (2019), SFL differs from CDA in that it examines the social environment after examining grammar as a means of meaning-making, rather than the other way around. While structural field language (SFL) analyses may pay more systematic attention to the paradigmatic structuring of grammatical choices (what was selected and what alternatives were available), critical discourse analysis (CDA) may place an emphasis on intertextual and interdiscursive features. Voice in political discourse is better understood and more robustly explained by this study, which employs an SFL-based technique. To achieve this, it examines a trend in CDA-influenced studies that fails to place passive constructions in context with other voice choices, despite their ideological significance.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

Based on the work of Halliday (1994) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), this study is based on the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which views grammar more as a tool for building meaning than as something determined by abstract formal qualities. According to the interpretivist view, it is an act of analytical interpretation to recognize speech patterns and give them ideological importance. Theoretical rigor and systematic methodology should direct these actions rather than reducing them to mechanical coding exercises.

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Data Source and Corpus

Aside from parliamentary debate transcripts found in the UK House of Commons' official Hansard records, the corpus also includes transcriptions of political forum programs airing on television, such as Question Time on the BBC, and online recordings of such events. Twelve sessions were selected between 2019 and 2022. Six of them were actual debates in parliament, and another six were broadcast versions of the forum. We opted for this period because it was rife with heated political debates, such as those concerning economic policy, the COVID-19 epidemic, and the implementation of Brexit. Roughly 85,000 words of political speech transcription make up the final corpus.

Since the two sources complement each other, we've decided to use them both. Television political debates attract more people and tend to be more heated than their parliamentary counterparts, where protocol and norms dictate the flow of discussion. Taken as a whole, they supply a wealth of information useful for analyzing the function of voice in various political forum discussions. Speakers from the ruling and opposition parties were hand-picked to discuss a broad spectrum of topics during these randomly selected sessions. Because of this, we were able to see how the political convictions of the speakers affected their points of view.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework comprises four interconnected components: (i) a clause-level transitivity analysis that delineates process types, participant roles, and contextual elements in accordance with Halliday and Matthiessen (2014); (ii) a voice categorization that classifies each clause as operative, receptive, or middle, with further subdivision into agentless versus agent-retained passives; (iii) an agent deletion strategy identification that adapts van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) sociosemantic framework for clause-level grammatical analysis; and (iv) an ideological encoding analysis that interprets voice patterns in relation to accountability management, institutional legitimation, and political positioning.

Coding Procedure

Everything was coded according to plan. The initial stage involved retrieving the corpus and organizing it according to any ranking clauses that were not embedded. And second, to determine the nature of the process and the responsibilities of the players, we examined each clause using the SFL transitivity framework. Third, our agent's expression was used to classify each clause as either operational, receptive, or middle voice. Nominalized process grammatical metaphors were recorded and filed away as voice-avoiding techniques in the fourth place. The fifth step was to compile all the data into a table and analyze it for trends based on speaker, topic, and political stance. In order to look at the ideological consequences of particular cases, we ran a thorough qualitative analysis.

Each clause in the analytical spreadsheet was marked with the following details: the institution of the speaker, the process type, the voice selection, the presence or absence of the agent, the structure of the themes, the evaluative orientation of the event (positive, negative, or neutral according to co-textual cues), and analyst notes regarding ideological function. The quantitative distributional analysis shown in the

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tables and the fine-grained qualitative judgments of individual passages—the meat and potatoes of the analytical argument—were both made possible by this level of coding information. A new category for "circumstantial agency substitution" and the realization that grammatical metaphor required its own voice-related category rather than being treated as an extra flag were the most significant alterations to the coding process, although there were a few others. There were two sessions totaling over 14,000 words in the pilot phase of the study.

Reliability and Validity

Various approaches were employed to guarantee uniformity in the analyses. A coding approach was developed with explicit decision-making criteria and illustrative examples prior to the commencement of the investigation. During the pilot study of two sessions—one a broadcast session and the other a parliamentary session—the method was modified multiple times. Another trained analyst coded approximately 12,750 words, representing a randomly chosen 15% subsample of the corpus, in order to evaluate inter-coder reliability. With Cohen's kappa values of 0.84, 0.87, and 0.81 for process type identification, voice categorization, and agent deletion approach classification, respectively—all surpassing the widely accepted threshold of 0.80 for considerable agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). We worked out our issues by open communication and the introduction of the new coding methodology, which eliminates ambiguity.

Data sources were triangulated through parliamentary and televised forums; an analysis log was used to document analyst reflexivity; and all interpretive assertions were founded on specific textual evidence that underwent thorough grammatical scrutiny. Data extracts serve as examples to supplement the results and allow readers to independently evaluate the analytical interpretations. Instead of using their own names, speakers are recognized by the position they hold within the institution. Transcripts of public political meetings were the only sources of data; therefore, there were minimal moral concerns. Obtaining permission was also unnecessary.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The results were classified into five groups based on the analysis's subject matter, all of which deal with the significance of voice in political forum conversation. In order to demonstrate data-driven systematic tendencies, the study uses clause-level transitivity analysis on standard corpus extracts. The findings are in perfect harmony with the two study aims, which are in accordance with the theoretical framework laid out in the literature review.

Active Voice and Explicit Agency Construction

According to the research, participants in online political forums intentionally use operational voice structures to highlight and attribute success to political players. Using the active voice goes beyond just selecting the default or unmarked option; it's a powerful declaration of agency that influences both interpersonal interactions and the development of ideas. The pattern is illustrated by this passage taken from a legislative debate on economic policy.

Excerpt 1 (Parliamentary Debate, March 2020):

‘We have invested over forty billion pounds in infrastructure. We have created three hundred thousand new jobs. This government has delivered on its promises to the

British people.’

Table 1 *Transitivity Analysis of Excerpt 1*

Clause	Process Type	Voice	Actor/Agent	Goal/Medium
We have invested over forty billion pounds	Material	Operative	We (Agent)	forty billion pounds (Medium)
We have created three hundred thousand new jobs	Material	Operative	We (Agent)	jobs (Medium)
This government has delivered on its promises	Material	Operative	This government (Agent)	promises (Scope)

Three words in the first excerpt use material operations: "invested," "produced," and "delivered." These words are in the operative voice. Each clause centers on the political actor, first as an inclusive pronoun ("we") and then as an institutional noun group ("this government"). Speakers can place maximum blame on political actors when they show each occurrence as having a clear agent acting on a medium. A change from an inclusive pronoun, which emphasizes unity among individuals, to a nominal identity, which underlines institutional authority, is marked by the transition from "we" to "this government" in the third clause. Both individual participation and institutional capacity are claimed in this.

When asked to comment on the results of effective policies, government speakers most often brought up this pattern. Within the corpus, government speakers used the operative voice in 72.3% of the 847 material process sentences when the outcome was viewed favorably. When the outcome was questioned or adversely appraised, only 41.6% of these statements were used. People utilize their voices for credit deliberately or frequently, as shown by this uneven distribution. This study places Fairclough's (2003) remark within a systematic voice analysis, rather than treating it as a standalone grammatical comment. As a result, it strengthens the thesis that political speech uses active agentive constructs for self-legitimation.

Passive Constructions and Agent Suppression

Receptive voice constructions, particularly agentless passives, were popular for managing responsibility in the corpus. There were two major developments: first, agentless passives, which omit the agent entirely from the clause; and second, agent-demoted passives, which retain the agent in an ambiguous contextual role (a "by" phrase) but dilute its thematic significance.

Excerpt 2 (Televised Forum, November 2020):

‘Mistakes were made in the early stages of the pandemic. Resources were not allocated where they were needed. Vulnerable communities were left without adequate support.’

Table 2 *Transitivity Analysis of Excerpt 2*

Clause	Process Type	Voice	Agent	Medium/Goal
Mistakes were made	Material	Receptive (agentless)	∅ (deleted)	Mistakes (Medium)
Resources were not allocated where they were needed	Material	Receptive (agentless)	∅ (deleted)	Resources (Medium)

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Vulnerable communities were left without adequate support	Material	Receptive (agentless)	∅ (deleted)	Vulnerable communities (Medium)
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Three clauses in Excerpt 2 share the same pattern of agentless receptive voice. In every instance, the agent or the individual(s) accountable for the oversight, distribution of resources, or assistance has been linguistically eradicated. The ergative viewpoint portrays all events as though they occurred independently of any outside forces: mistakes "were made" as if they appeared out of thin air, resources "were not allocated" as if they weren't distributed, and communities "were left" as if abandoned by chance rather than by named political figures. By claiming these catastrophes are merely unfortunate coincidences rather than the result of deliberate human action, ideological forces attempt to normalize them.

A minister in the government designed this pattern in reaction to opposition criticism of the government's handling of the outbreak, making it unique. Even in this formal speech, the agent that was removed is there. Furthermore, the speaker's political group is no longer held responsible because of the agentless passive voice. This tactic is a perfect illustration of what Van Leeuwen (2008) calls "exclusion by suppression": the guilty party is not only marginalized but also totally removed from the term's representational framework.

Looking at the entire corpus, we find that 34.2% of the responses given by government speakers to hostile inquiries regarding failed policies contain agentless passives. Rather than using agentless passives, opponents of the government favored the active voice with a distinct agent in 18.7% of their receptive clauses. This is due to their desire to implicate the government. This distributional pattern provides strong empirical support for the concept that voice can regulate accountability in political discourse, according to Chilton (2004) and Fairclough (2003).

A distinction emerges upon closer inspection of agentless passive patterns, the nature of which is more process dependent. Patterns indicating ideological significance were also found in verbal process passives, in addition to the more prevalent material process passives (Excerpt 2). Here we see evidence of this:

Excerpt 2b (Parliamentary Debate, January 2022):

'It has been said that the policy lacks ambition. Concerns have been raised about the timeline. Questions have been asked about the adequacy of funding.'

All three verbal process clauses—"It has been said," "concerns have been raised," and "questions have been asked"—make up this passage. "Agentless receptive voice is employed by all three. Everyone who speaks, raises their hand, or asks a question—the Sayer—is eliminated in every instance. Compared to material process passives, the effect of this pattern is drastically different. By removing the agent from a material process, it is also possible to remove the "doer" from a physical or institutional action. It is possible to get to the bottom of someone's criticism or concern by removing the agent from a verbal procedure. The ideological consequence is to devalue criticisms by making them appear like unsubstantiated opinions rather than the assertions of identifiable political opponents who can be debated, disproved, or held to account. The speaker employs the narcissistic strategy of acknowledging the existence of criticism (which is effective in individual settings) while simultaneously erasing its political relevance by rendering its origins intractable. Although this approach is used in 23.8% of verbal process clauses in government speakers' contributions, the current study on passivization in political discourse does not sufficiently address it. A

considerable degree of discursive management is seen.

Strategic Backgrounding and Foregrounding Through Voice

The investigation uncovered more complex means of controlling agents through speech, such as purposefully changing the structure and substance of themes, instead of merely determining if agents are present or not. In agent-retained passives, the agent is grammatically present even though it is no longer the subject of the sentence. Rather, the focus is on the medium or goal. Although the agent's role in the disagreement is diminished with this strategy, it is not eliminated entirely.

Excerpt 3 (Parliamentary Debate, June 2021):

‘The decision was taken by the Cabinet after extensive consultation. The policy was approved by all relevant committees. These measures were supported by the evidence presented to the House.’

In the third passage, there are three clauses where the speaker uses the receptive voice while retaining the agency. According to the ergative analysis, the agent's constituent pieces are located in the clause's rhematic zone, where novel information might be discovered. These metrics, along with the policies and decisions that have been made, constitute the Medium zone. Two ideological goals are accomplished simultaneously by this arrangement. To begin with, the language places more emphasis on the policies and activities than on the individuals or organizations tasked with carrying them out. Second, numerous receptive clauses provide authority to various institutional players (e.g., the Cabinet, committees, evidence, etc.) in the causal chain. There is a concept here called "diffused agency." This structure prevents any one agent from taking on too much duty.

Members of the legislature who took the floor during discussions were required to demonstrate compliance with established procedures and adhere to established rules of procedure. Their primary tactic for dispersing agency was to employ a responsive voice with dispersed agents. Here we see the textual metafunction at work: by adopting an open tone, the speaker can choose the message's theme—its policy or choice—and the actors who legitimize it—its rheme—the new information it imparts. In answer to RQ2, this section shows how voice can serve as a semiotic resource for ideational representation (via agency diffusion) and textual arrangement (thematic foregrounding of acts over actors) in tandem.

An additional layer of strategic backgrounding emerges when the speech and surrounding factors are coordinated. Give this some thought:

Excerpt 3b (Televised Forum, April 2021):

‘Benefits were reduced in line with fiscal responsibility targets. Services were restructured in accordance with efficiency recommendations from the independent review.’

Here, the agentless receptive voice structures serve a purpose analogous to that of the defunct agent, fully incorporating contextual information such as "in line with fiscal responsibility targets" and "in accordance with efficiency recommendations from the independent review." Instead of choosing a single individual, the situation is dependent on institutional procedures and general principles to fill the void left by an agent's removal. This technique, which is referred to as "circumstantial agency substitution," is an effective means of shifting blame away from individuals and onto an impersonal, non-actor source of legitimacy.

This trend develops as a result of the language strategy of "impersonalization" and

"abstraction" described by Van Leeuwen's (2008) model for classifying social actors. Structured in this way, the policy action can be rationalized as a response to impersonal institutional demands, and the political actor can avoid direct blame because the action is syntactically separated from them. While either the verbal or the circumstantial system may achieve its ideological purposes independently, they complement one another. By illuminating the interplay between the two systems, this finding expands upon earlier efforts in SFL research.

Voice and Accountability Management

Each speaker's contributions followed a unique pattern of voice alternation, according to the research. The shifts from active to passive speech were in sync with the event's evaluational orientation. An ideologically significant finding of the study is the pattern referred to as "evaluative voice alternation."

Excerpt 4 (Televised Forum, February 2022):

'We launched the most ambitious vaccination programme in Europe. We secured the contracts early, and we rolled out the programme at record speed. But of course, some disruptions were experienced in the supply chain, and some appointments were cancelled due to circumstances beyond our control.'

There is a noticeable difference in the spoken context between the two sections of the clip that cover separate topics. The three operative voice phrases that praise the immunization program in the first segment—"we launched," "we secured," and "we rolled out"—put the political agent in the position of thematic subject. When the second part of the sentence begins with the word "but," the voice changes to one that is receptive. Agentless passive voice constructions like "disruptions were experienced" and "appointments were canceled" obfuscate the identity of the agent responsible for the negative consequences. Adding the caveat "due to circumstances beyond our control" makes the reason even more external, as it implies that the negative occurrences are caused by unknown political agents rather than obvious outside forces.

This change in speech accomplishes all three goals simultaneously when seen through the prism of metafunction. It constructs a utopian conception of agency, wherein the political actor acts as an agent in response to positive events but not to negative ones. According to Potter (1996), when a speaker adopts a receptive voice, they shift from being an authoritative agent in the positive domain to a passive observer in the negative domain, thus altering their approach to holding others accountable. As the text departs from questions of political responsibility, it moves from the Agent-as-Theme perspective, which centers on the political actor, to the Medium-as-Theme perspective, which centers on the entities that are impacted.

The majority of the government speakers' lengthy remarks that addressed both positive and negative outcomes simultaneously followed this pattern of shifting between evaluative voices. The corpus as a whole displayed this pattern. Those on the other side of the argument made up just 23.1% of the total, yet they consistently used the operative voice regardless of their evaluative orientation, giving praise where it was due and laying blame where it was necessary. This inequitable distribution demonstrates that the usage of voice alternation is influenced by dynamics of political position and responsibility rather than by random grammatical variation. One intentional use of voice alternation is as a semiotic resource.

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Voice as a Tool of Ideological Positioning

The research concludes with a review of the ways in which the cumulative effect of language choices made over long periods of time in political forum debate impacts more general ideological stances. First, we avoided utilizing the voice entirely by making use of grammatical metaphors; second, we made the policy implications appear more natural by using the middle voice and ergative phrases.

Excerpt 5 (Parliamentary Debate, October 2022):

‘The economy has contracted. Inflation has risen sharply. The cost of living has increased beyond what many families can sustain.’

Nothing external is responsible for the three changes described in Excerpt 5: "contracted," "risen," and "increased." Rather, the middle voice is used for all three lines. As if on their own, the economy contracts, prices rise, and living expenses rise; these are one-participant clauses, according to the ergative perspective, in which the process generates itself. These economic conditions are portrayed as inevitable rather than the result of deliberate political action due to ideological limitations. It is a phrase structure that is neither fully functional nor completely receptive, but it does depict the process without any outside source, according to Halliday (1994), who calls it the "middle" alternative.

There is a difference between naturalizing the agentless passive and the middle voice. The occurrence occurs naturally and without external interference, as shown by the middle voice, which makes it seem non-agentive. Instead of naming specific people, the agentless passive implies that someone "made" the errors. This distinction is significant in political forum speech because it reveals that the speaker denies the involvement of anybody else when they employ the middle voice to talk about economic collapse. Along with attempting to conceal their identity, the speaker refrains from naming the party responsible. Government intervention is not something that causes economic processes but rather something that is inherent to the natural order, in their view.

Excerpt 6 (Televised Forum, September 2021):

‘The prioritisation of economic recovery, the restructuring of public services, and the modernisation of our infrastructure represent the core commitments of this government.’

Political forum discourse, as seen in paragraph 6, makes use of language metaphors that do not adhere to the voice system. In their unaltered versions, the three nominalized processes of "prioritization," "restructuring," and "modernization" would include voice selection and potentially reveal who is doing what to whom. However, these processes are actually material. A relational identifying clause uses these reconstructed processes as nominal groupings to operate as the token, with the phrase "reflect the essential commitments" appearing twice. The agent, medium, operative, and receptive selection functions have been eliminated because the process has been symbolically turned into an entity, making it irrelevant to the speech system.

The goal of rhetoric is to make policy objectives sound authoritative, impersonal, and cohesive; this tactic was most often used in programmatic pronouncements and keynote speeches. The nominalization of the voice system's material processes and the relational process type of the framing phrase both contribute to the grammatical metaphor's suppression of meaning. Because relational clauses cannot accept agents, the relational process—which incorporates the nominalized material processes—is inherently non-agentive in the ergative sense.

Grammatical metaphor and middle voice are two approaches to voice that, theoretically, SFL-based discourse analysis can benefit greatly from differentiating. The process is transformed into a nominal group via grammatical metaphor, but it remains in the verbal group and the voice system when the middle voice chooses the "no external cause" option. Both procedures accomplish the same thing—that is, producing representations devoid of apparent agency—but they do so in quite different ways, with respect to semantic subtlety and grammatical mechanics. In the grammatical metaphor, events are seen as impersonal and amenable to categorization, assessment, and relational procedures; in contrast, the middle voice portrays events as autonomous and inherent to the medium. Grammatical metaphor gives events substance inside bureaucratic frameworks in political communication, while middle voice gives the impression that events occur naturally (as if things happen on their own volition).

Certain speakers' remarks shed ideological light on the interplay of diverse methodologies. Here we have a minister from the government using both approaches in a series of clauses:

Excerpt 6b (Parliamentary Debate, December 2021):

‘Energy prices have risen dramatically this winter. The global supply chain has tightened. These developments necessitate the acceleration of our domestic energy strategy and the diversification of supply sources.’

The supply chain "has tightened" and energy costs "have risen" as if these economic occurrences were unrelated; both clauses use the middle voice to make them sound normal. The third sentence describes the measures taken by the government and calls them "acceleration" and "diversification." In an alternative grammatical metaphor, "These developments" are rephrased as "These abstract entities," which are necessary for the previous natural processes. A grammatical metaphor portrays the government's reaction as an objective, rational institutional process, and the middle voice describes the external circumstances as inherent and uncontrollable; this three-clause sequence is ideologically well-constructed. By utilizing two distinct voice-related linguistic tactics simultaneously, the government can claim to possess the necessary institutional knowledge to address the issue while simultaneously evading responsibility.

4.6 Interplay of Voice Across Metafunctions: An Integrated Analysis

Vocalization in political forum conversation is more than simply a grammatical element, as we learnt in the previous sections. It is a semiotic tool with many uses; it facilitates metafunctions in the areas of ideas, interpersonal relationships, and text. In this last stage of study, we look at a longer clip that demonstrates their interaction to bring all of these pieces together.

Excerpt 7 (Parliamentary Debate, May 2022):

‘I want to assure the honourable member that this government has taken decisive action on climate change. New regulations have been introduced. Emissions targets have been set that are among the most ambitious in the world. And investment in renewable energy has been increased by over sixty percent. The transition to a green economy is well underway.’

Excerpt 7's five clauses demonstrate a well-planned style of expression. The first phrase establishes the speaker's authority and autonomy in the interpersonal context ("I want to assure"). A mental desiderative process using an operative voice. The change from passive to active voice in the second phrase states that the government is combating climate change. "Targets have been set," "regulations have been put in

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place," and "investment has gone up. " These three phrases follow in the receptive voice. "All of these are passives that don't have agents." The final portion, "The transition is well underway," is a relational attributional sentence and hence completely lacks agency.

The many complex tasks performed by this voice trajectory include transitioning from an operational to a receptive and finally a relational state. It presents the state as having vast power to make "decisive action," but the policymaking itself is portrayed as cold and faceless, with no obvious protagonists or antagonists, from an ideological standpoint. Without being directly involved in the implementation, the speaker can nevertheless get a lot of credit in this way. By shifting from first-person ("I") to third-person ("this government") and agentless constructions, the speaker abdicates some of their personal responsibility while retaining institutional control. Additionally, they control how people express themselves in conversation. By moving the informational focus from the political actor to the policy objects and, finally, to the abstract state of events, the textual trajectory builds a bridge from agency to factuality as it progresses from Agent-as-Theme to Medium-as-Theme to Carrier-as-Theme.

This comprehensive research shows that voice does not act alone but rather as one of three metafunctions that share resources in a coordinated fashion. This finding responds to RQ2 and demonstrates how profound a systemic functional linguistics perspective on political speech is theoretically. Beyond the usual results of CDA studies on passivization, this study shows a metafunctional interaction that highlights the interpersonal and textual aspects of voice choice in addition to the ideational aspect, which is the most often studied.

Implications of this discovery go far beyond the immediate context of the analysis. If, as the study shows, speech functions multifunctionally, then research that focuses just on voice inside the ideational metafunction, like most recent studies, fails to capture the full range of voice's semiotic action. Examining the speaker's choice of voice in political communication from multiple angles is necessary for a complete understanding of voice in this context. Politicians make strategic use of the multitasking capabilities of the human voice when delivering speeches. In this light, voice is not merely a grammatical device for establishing agency but rather a fully developed semiotic tool for addressing the myriad needs of political discourse. Among these demands are the idealistic desire to present events as they actually occurred, the interpersonal need to establish rapport and balance power with other people, and the textual requirement to arrange ideas in a way that is easy to understand and follow. In a political forum, all three requirements are aggressively and concurrently at play, making the variegated nature of speech most visible.

Table 3 *Distribution of Voice Types Across Speaker Positions (Material Process Clauses)*

Voice Type	Govt (Positive)	Govt (Negative)	Opp. (Positive)	Opp. (Negative)
Operative	72.3%	41.6%	68.9%	74.2%
Receptive (agentless)	8.4%	34.2%	10.1%	6.3%
Receptive (agent-retained)	6.1%	12.8%	8.4%	5.7%
Middle	5.8%	7.2%	6.9%	4.1%

Grammatical metaphor	7.4%	4.2%	5.7%	9.7%
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Based on the speaker's position and the evaluative orientation, Table 3 shows how the corpus uses different sorts of voices for material process clauses. In addition to confirming the prior qualitative findings, the asymmetries in the table display other interesting patterns. Operational speech is typically used (72.3 percent of the time) when the government discusses positive things. The use of operational speech drops significantly to 41.6% when negative items are spoken, whereas the use of agentless receptive voice increases from 8.4% to 34.2%. The operative voice is used by 74.2% of speakers when discussing negative government actions. In terms of positive outcomes, 68.9% of those who voice their disapproval also do the same. People are clearly using their voices on purpose in discussions about politics, according to these distributional trends.

Conclusion, Findings, and Implications

Responding to the Research Questions

In order to better understand how people use their voices to make sense of political forum discourse, this study set out to undertake an exhaustive SFL analysis. In a satisfactory manner, the findings address both research inquiries.

The evidence suggests that political actors purposefully use all aspects of the speech system in response to RQ1. The operative voice is much more frequently used (72.3% of the time) by government speakers when they discuss positive policy outcomes. Their choice of speech style seems to be an attempt to draw attention to political figures while simultaneously claiming credit for positive results. Government speakers often use the passive voice, particularly in situations when it lacks an agent, to restrict people's freedom and absolve themselves of responsibility for unintended consequences. Among the substantive clauses discussing these occurrences, agentless passives constituted 34.2%. By normalizing and portraying political and economic events as self-generated processes devoid of external causes, middle voice structures serve a certain ideological objective. Not only does this technique exclude agents, it outright rejects the existence of any external agents. When compared to passive or middle voice, grammatical metaphor provides an additional layer of agency suppression. To do this, we use nominalization to completely remove processes from the speech system.

This study answers RQ2 by showing that voice operates in tandem with the other two metafunctions and interacts dynamically with other transitivity components. The voice choice was related to the process type; material processes were highly strategic and featured a wide variety of voices, whereas relational and existential processes were utilized to create impersonal depictions of political circumstances due to their inherent lack of agency. Voice choice has a direct impact on literary metafunction due to its thematic repercussions. It was the impacted entities, the media, who took center stage in the receptive voice, as opposed to the political participants, the agents, who occupied that position in the operative voice. Researchers found that speakers who could modulate their vocal tones were better at controlling the tone of accountability in social contexts, coming across as authoritative when things were going well and using depersonalized notions to avoid responsibility when things went wrong.

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Contributions

Several parts of SFL theory and studies of political discourse are enhanced by this work. In the first place, it proves that there is more than one way to analyze speech; a more thorough method that takes into account grammatical metaphorical choices, middle metaphorical choices, operative metaphorical choices, and receptive metaphorical choices gives better insights. The inclusion of grammatical metaphor and middle voice as ideologically relevant voice-related tactics improves the analytical framework for discourse analysis based on SFL. The discovery that events are reclassified as abstract entities through grammatical metaphor and presented as self-engendered by the middle voice reveals a functional differentiation within the larger category of 'agency suppression' that has not been investigated enough in previous studies.

The second point is that "evaluative voice alternation" is an innovative way of considering the strategic use of voice in persuasive political discourse. This relates to the manner in which the evaluative perspective mirrors the speakers' voice changes as they deliver their remarks. The significance of this finding extends beyond the observation that politicians often resort to passive voice in order to evade accountability; rather, it reveals a system of voice deployment wherein receptive voice is consistently associated with good evaluations and operational voice with bad ones. It appears that evaluative voice alternation is more of a conventionalized discursive technique than an uncommon grammatical decision, as this pattern appears 67.4% of the time in the longer contributions of government speakers.

Third, according to the integrated metafunctional approach, speech is shown to be more than just a resource for ideas when it comes to understanding agency; it is recognized as a multifunctional semiotic system that functions in both textual and interpersonal situations. Because the choice of voice affects thematic structure (agent-as-theme vs. medium-as-theme), interpersonal positioning (authoritative agent vs. passive experiencer), and the formation of ideational representations of agency and causality, we need a more comprehensive and metafunctionally cohesive method of voice analysis than is usually used in SFL or CDA research. This research responds to the request made by Martin (1993b) for an approach to discourse analysis that takes into account the simultaneous functioning of metafunctions.

A new analytical finding, the identification of "circumstantial agency substitution" (the fourth point), improves our comprehension of how ideological representation makes use of both voice and circumstantial systems. Here, abstract institutional sources of power are substituted for removed human beings by means of complex contextual elements added to passive, agentless systems. A more sophisticated approach to accountability, this tactic is typically discussed in legislative debates but needs to be tested in many institutional contexts.

In addition to analyzing ideological encoding, agent deletion strategies, voice classification, and transitivity, this study adds to the existing literature by providing a repeatable analytical framework for systematic coding processes. After that, the procedure is checked for accuracy by comparing the results from different judges. By combining quantitative distributional analysis with careful qualitative clause-level interpretation, the framework provides a model for bringing together political language discourse analysis and corpus linguistics. Given the methodical foundation it provides for comparative inquiry, this approach is applicable to a wide range of languages and institutional discourse environments.

Limitations and Future Directions

Recognizing some constraints is critical. Because it is based solely on British political discourse, the corpus—which contains approximately 85,000 words—may not provide a good illustration of how individuals from different languages and cultures discuss politics. Possible differences in the use of voice and political agency among languages with more complex voice systems, such as Austronesian languages with their intricate focus systems, or languages with distinctive middle voice morphology, such as Greek. While qualitative interpretivist technique is well-suited to the theoretical goals of SFL analysis, assertions of statistical generalizability lack any foundation. The distributional results should not be interpreted as population-wide traits but rather as trends within this particular corpus. It would be prudent to examine written political texts such as policy papers, legislative instruments, and political manifestos independently due to the known differences in voice distribution between spoken and written registers (Biber et al., 1999).

Analytical reflexivity presents another obstacle. According to O'Grady (2019), the ideological beliefs of the analyst influence their evaluations of the political relevance of grammar choices when Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) studies ideological representation. Readers are urged to carefully review the data provided before attributing ideological purpose to specific voice selections. This is still an interpretive attempt, despite the fact that the systematic coding process and inter-coder reliability evaluation help with it.

It would be beneficial for future research to include more dimensions in their study. Research on the role of voice in political communication across languages might help academics determine if the patterns they've seen are specific to English or political speech more broadly. The similarities and differences between pro-drop and ergative-absolutive languages are intriguing because they allow for diverse grammatical structures to demonstrate agency and allow agents to be left out of sentences instead of being deemed passive. Finding out how much evaluative voice switching is a learned political skill and how voice use changes over time can be accomplished through longitudinal studies that follow speech patterns throughout political careers or the lifetime of individual policy fights. One way to understand the communication ecology of political forums is through multimodal studies that look at how different elements like visual framing, vocal emphasis, prosodic and gestural resources, and visual semiotics interact with each other. Lastly, computational methods that use NLP tools to find speech patterns in bigger datasets could enhance the comprehensive qualitative analysis given here by providing a more comprehensive quantitative map of speech distribution in political discourse. This could reveal patterns that aren't visible in smaller datasets.

By shedding light on the semiotic role of vocal expression in discussions of responsibility, ideological stance, and power within political forums, this study deepens our understanding of political and social dynamics. Additionally, it demonstrates the continued utility of Halliday's systemic functional theory for analyzing institutional language.

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