# The Language of the Screen: A Corpus-based Study of Globally-awarded Film Screenplays[*]

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**Abstract**

Films, a visual art that initiates with the screenplay as one genre of creative writing, shape social beliefs and individual behavior. The present study investigates the sub-genre of *action* in ten screenplays that were made into films by international film producers. The current sample was compiled into one corpus of film scripts, utilizing two corpus analysis tools, namely, AntConc and Voyant Tools, to examine the linguistic peculiarities of *action* in screenplays. The analysis employed the theory of Systemic Functional Grammar, in particular, the Ideational and the Textual Metafunctions, to examine three linguistic aspects of the sub-genre: the lexical component, the thematic structure, and the verbal group element. The findings revealed that screenwriters tend to use technical and straightforward language, in a condensed style whose purpose may facilitate the process of film production. The findings also revealed that a film script is a pre-existing model of the visual story in the cognition of the screenwriter, and that films are both language and language system.

**Keywords**: screenplay, corpus linguistics, SFG, action, the lexical component, thematic structure, verbal group element

# The Language of the Screen: A Corpus-based Study of Globally-awarded Film Screenplays

**الملخص**

يُعد الفيلم السينمائي مصدراً لتشكيل القناعات الأجتماعية والسلوك الفردي، وهو نوع من الفن المعتمد علي السيناريو كدربٍ من دروب الكتابة الأبداعية. تتبني الدراسة الحالية تحليلاً لغوي لعشر أفلام تم انتاجها بواسطة شركات الأنتاج العالمية، والذي فيه تم بناء متنَّ لغوياً من العشر الأفلام المختارة للتعرف علي الخصائص اللغوية لهذا النوع من الكتابات الأبداعية. تم تطويع نظرية النحو الوظيفي النظامي لدراسة ثلاث خصائص لغوية، ألا وهي: المكون المفرداتي للسيناريو، والبناء السيمائي للعبارة، والفعل. أظهرت الدراسة نزعة كُتاب السيناريو الي استخدام لغة صريحة تتسم بالأسلوب المختصر، وهو ما يُمكن عملية الأنتاج السينمائي فيما بعد. لقد أظهرت النتائج أيضاً بأن النص السينمائي أو السيناريو هو نموذج مبدئي للفيلم في إدراك المؤلف.

**الكلمات المفتاحية**: السيناريو – المتن اللغوي – النحو الوظيفي النظامي – الحركة – المكون المفرداتي – البناء السيمائي - الفعل

## 1. Introduction

Despite the fact that the entire film industry is based on the creative process of writing a film script, what the general audience have access to is the final product of a script (i.e., the film itself) and not the script as a literary or textual form. A screenplay as a genre is one kind of texts written for the specific purpose of film production, in a formulaic page-structure, built up of separate shots, sequences and scenes. There is no particular prescribed number of scenes per page. There are four main components of a screenplay: the slugline (which includes information about time and place of the scene), action (description of characters and what will be seen and/or heard on screen), dialogue, and scene transitions. Other sub-elements may optionally appear, such as parenthetical information, camera action (determining the type of shot – very close shot, medium shot, etc.).

In the action segment, the screenwriter details the events in which the characters are involved, including time, place and description of key actions, always located at the very left side of the page, below which follows the dialogue with its parenthetical information, and finally scene transitions (Jahala, 2008; Snyder, 2005). The focus of the present study is directed towards the action segments of the selected screenplays.

From a linguistic standpoint, Macdonald & Macdonald (2013: p.

18-19) regard screenplays as worthy objects of analysis, especially since they make use of standard language. They also regard screenplays, being part of the pre-production phase of an arduous industry, as a challenge for screenwriters. Roughly less than 1 percent of those texts make it to film production, which in many cases, even this small amount of accepted scripts faces the risk of financial failure. Screenplays are, therefore, problematic texts by nature. These strands of different modes are problematic because they are described using what Macdonald (2004) calls "standard language" (with the exception of dialogue, which might require different levels of informal language), combined with cues on the page, such as the fact that one page should be approximately equivalent to one minute of screen time and that, despite using a linguistic form, it should be written and read as a screen work.

Writing for the screen has to be structured in a certain way that ensures both vividness of description and brevity of style or **densification** – sometimes referred to as *compressed style*: packing more meaning into less space (Leech 2009).

Krysanova (2019) suggests that, on the cognitive level, a film script is a model or scheme of the to-be-film that exists only in the writer's mind and that it is the embodiment of the screenwriter's intentions. It is a moving picture in the writers' cognition, structured in a form of a mono-modal text (a text which contains one mode of the linguistic text without any pictorial, auditory, or paralinguistic information).

While a screenplay belongs to the realm of film production, it also possesses some features of a literary work (Richsand, 2017) – features such as characters, dialogue, narrative, and a story that arcs, with the difference being that it only contains commentaries that guide the implementation of non-linguistic features of films.

Writing for the screen as an art has been in progress since the beginning of the twentieth century with the advent of George Melies and his first work *Trip to the Moon* in 1902. Screenwriting went through discrete developments according to the needs of the era and

has drastically changed with the rise of technology. The earliest film theorists such as Bazin (1972; 2004) and Mitz (1991) regarded cinema as a new form of art, although different from earlier forms such as painting, theatre, and still photography in its dynamicity and relatedness to the notion of realism. Because of their closeness to the notions of realism and reality, films have the ability to shape social beliefs and behaviors of individuals (Cape 2003; Wedding & Boyd, 1999), which in turn affect cultural values due to the degree of realism film stories provide to viewers.

The present study examined the screenplay as a genre by looking at three linguistic features, namely: the lexical components of screenplays, the thematic structure of the clauses, and the verbal group element or Processes according to the SFG theory (Section 3), with the focus being directed towards the action segments (being a sub-genre of the genre of screenplay). The study dissected patterns and grammatical configurations of these features in 10 screenplays, which were produced into global awarded or nominated films internationally.

In light of this, the study attempted to answer one major research question that has not received attention in the body of literature available: *What does a corpus analysis reveal about the tools screenwriters employ in the action segment of the screenplay?* To answer this, two sub-questions were posed:

a. What are the linguistic constituents of the ACTION segment of screenplays?

b. What are the lexical components, the thematic structures, and the processes these ACTION segments deploy the most?

## 2. Literature Review

In the available body of literature on screenwriting, there are two types of publications that deal with film scripts. First, there is a number of guide books that contain instructions on the nature of screenplays and the different approaches of writing a successful script. These include, but not limited to Snyder (2005) *Save the cat*, Sternberg (1997) *Written for the Screen*, Mckee (1999) *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and The Principles of Screenwriting*, and

Field (2005) *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*.

The one limitation of these volumes is viewed, and even bitterly criticized by Macdonald (2004) and later by Moreno (2014), as a 'low theory'. Such a description of these volumes on screenwriting arises from the fact that they, instead of offering an analysis of already existing film scripts, they are mere instruction books for the writing process.

Field (2005) looks at the screenplay for educational purposes, a guide for novice screenwriters, where he explains the principles of the art. Field makes clear the boundary between the genres of novel, play, and screenplay. A screenplay according to Field is a visual medium that dramatizes a basic story line through pictures, images, and pieces of film. This implies that a screenplay is a story that is told in pictures – a pictorial work in its very essence, "a linear arrangement of related incidents, episodes, or events leading to a dramatic resolution" (Field, p. 29). Field assures that the standardized form of the screenplay is its single most quality that distinguishes the art from other genres.

Another book is Snyder's (2005), who, like Field, builds his instructional book on real examples from screenplays. Again, linguistic consideration of film scripts is minor; rather, the focus is directed towards the mechanisms of a film script from beginning to end. While a reader of a film script can infer the structure of a screenplay by reading one example, noticing the layout and ingredients that will immediately instruct him on the nature of the genre, what is needed is the role the language plays in writing a screenplay, a role played by, for example, lexical choices and grammatical forms that can elevate the work into a film.

Other theories and books deal with the cinema as an art and do not engage directly in the genre of screenplays as the essence of filmmaking. These include the famous essays of Andre Bazin (2004). Bazin tends to offer an approach to the meaning of films and dynamic pictorial compositions, comparing it to other forms of art such as photography, painting, and theatre.

A much recent theory on cinema is provided by Metz (1992).

Metz argues that a film is a form of language but not a language system. While film makes meanings as a language of visual composition, it is not a language system in the sense that we may view a word as a picture, a sentence as a scene, or a number of sentences as a sequence. There is a line that divides the system of language and that of the cinema. The cinema is seen as rather a non-system language.

Apart from the theory of film, the majority of the empirical studies on films and screenplays take dialogue (Bednarek, 2014b; Davis, 2016; Forchini, 2012; Kozloff, 2000; Mittmann, 2006; Quaglio, 2008; Skowron et al., 2016), characters (Bednarek, 2010a; Bubel, 2005; D'Vari, 2005; Pearson, 2007; Mandala, 2007), and text structure (Tincheva, 2012; Murtagh et al., 2009) as their objects of analysis. Other studies (Wang-Gempp, n.d.; Jhala, 2008; Ramakrishna et al., 2017; Danescu-Niculescu et al., 2011) employed computational linguistics and corpus analysis. In relevance to characters, a few studies comprised computational linguistics and corpus analysis (Agarwal et al., 2014; Gil et al., 2011; Skowron et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2011).

Krysanova (2019) as well as Moreno (2014) and Maras (2009) investigated the multimodal facet of film scripts; assessing the quality of film scripts (Chiu & Feng, n.d.); and the *green lighting* process of film scripts in the pre-production phase (Eliashberg et al., 2007; Moreno, 2014; Macdonald, 2004). The green lighting process refers to the stage of acceptance or rejection of a screenplay in terms of its production into film. Other studies attempted the construction of specialized film scripts for the visually-impaired audiences (Lakritz & Salway, 2006; Rhorbach et al., 2015; Salway & Graham, 2003); and finally studies that took film scripts for pedagogical implications (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Colwell & Braschi, 2006; King, 2002; Webb & Rodgers, 2009).

However, to the best of this writer's knowledge, no study has embarked to undertake an analysis of the ACTION segment of screenplays. Little is known about this segment as a sub-genre. And given its importance in terms of its being at the heart of what is to

become a movie, the proposed study aimed to examine this problem in order to explore how ACTION is linguistically realized and the way it is translated into scenes on the screen.

## 3. Methodology

The study aimed at exploring textual strands in a number of Screenplays written in the English language. The primary sources of data were online websites: https://screenplayed.com/ and https://www.simplyscripts.com/, from which ten scripts were selected.

First, the ten screenplays were purposely selected based on the fact that they either won or were nominated for global awards. Worth mentioning here is that nomination and selection go through the same pre-stages of selection. The production of the selected scripts into films spans from 1990 to 2020, starting from the time when technology and computer assisted direction and computer cinematographic features revolutionized the cinema, knowing that before the 1990s these technologies were not yet in full shape.

The ten selected screenplays are: *Atonement* (Hampton, 2007), *1917* (Mendes & Wilson-Cairns, 2018), *Brooklyn* (Hornby, 2017), *Good Will Hunting* (Damon & Affleck, 1997), *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014), *Manchester by the Sea* (Lonergan, 2016), *The Pianist* (Harwood, 1998), *The Revenant* (Smith, 2010), *Lady Bird* (Gerwig, 2017), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1994). The length of the selected screenplays ranges from 90 to 120 pages each. The internal structure of these works includes sluglines, dialogue, action parts, scene transitions, and parenthetical information.

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is a form of grammatical description within the framework of systemic functional linguistics. SFG views language as a network of systems, where each system represents an interrelated set of options for creating meaning. It emphasizes the functional aspects of language and how it serves various purposes in communication. System: Refers to the interconnected sets of options available in language. These systems include choices related to grammar, lexis, and discourse. Halliday's grammar builds upon the work of linguists like Saussure, Firth, and

the Prague school, as well as anthropological linguists like Boas, Sapir, and Whorf. Whorf's insights into cultural variations in meaning had a profound impact on Halliday's thinking. In summary, SFG provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing language by considering its functional aspects, systemic choices, and the multidimensional nature of human experience and communication.

From these resources, the analysis initially utilized the textual metafunction, where the clause is viewed as a Message (i.e., message refers to the quantum of information in the flow of discourse) and the way this information sequence is construed through the system of theme. The system of theme comprises three types of themes: Topical, Interpersonal, and Textual. A text, unified and serving a specific purpose, is expected to use functional cohesive ties that carry its meaning forward. Textual themes, for example, are devices that tie the text as one coherent document and they occur either at the beginning of a clause or a clause-complex or in the middle of a clause-complex to join clauses of either an equal or unequal syntactic status.

There is no search syntax that may allow the identification of all the types of the thematic structure of all the clauses in a corpus, regardless how small the corpus is. Therefore, the 10 scripts are manually annotated and given abbreviated terminologies for both the types of themes and their grammatical status of MARKEDNESS.

A *transitivity* analysis was also conducted to examine the verbal group element. Transitivity is a fundamental concept within Systemic Functional Grammar. The term refers to the set of options through which a speaker encodes their experience of both the external world processes and the internal world of consciousness. It involves representing participants, processes, and their circumstances in language. Within SFG, Transitivity falls under the ideational metafunction. This metafunction focuses on how language represents our experiences of the world. Halliday identifies six process types in the Transitivity system of English. These are *Material*: describes actions or events involving physical processes; *Mental*: relates to cognitive processes, thoughts, or mental states; *Relational*: expresses

relationships or states of being; *Behavioural*: describes behaviors or actions of living beings; *Verbal*: involves communication through speech or writing; and *Existential*: indicates existence or presence. Transitivity provides a lens through which we analyze how language reflects our experiences and interactions with the world.

According to the described data, the present study deployed a mixture of quantitative and qualitative design. The quantitative dimension pertained to the lexical components of screenplays, the thematic structure of the clauses, processes, and keyword analysis. To study the lexical components of the screenplays, three resources were examined: *readability index*, *sentence length*, and *vocabulary density*. Readability index is a measurement of a text's complexity. Readability index or complexity of a text was measured by the two main factors of the average sentence length and the average word length, measured by the average number of syllables per word. Measuring the two other lexical features (sentence length and vocabulary density) contributed to the identification of the readability index, and, thus, the three concepts were related when it came to identifying the degree of complexity of the ten film scripts under study. This was executed by two corpus analysis software: AntConc and Voyant Tools.

The study generated samples from multiple corpora: GloWbe, COCA, TV, Soap, NOW, Movies, and Wiki (Table 4.2). The size of these samples was 20,879,921 tokens and was referred to as Reference Corpus 2. The corpora and the numbers in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 were generated by the same software, the Voyant Tools and AntConc, to ensure consistency.

The qualitative analysis was conducted on scenes and sequences which were randomly selected. The focus was directed towards the clausal structure of the selected scenes and sequences in light of the verbal group element, the lexical component, and the thematic structure of the scenes. The film script corpus was manually annotated using abbreviated forms. For example, on the transitivity level, MTP was used for material process, MNP for mental process, BHP for

behavioral, EXT for existential, and VEP for verbal. MARKED and UNMARKED were used to identify Markedness of the clausal structure. Other abbreviated forms were used to identify elliptical clauses (clauses with missing grammatical items), such as -F for elliptical finite operator, -S for elliptical subject, and -P for elliptical process. This allowed for a more practical extraction of elliptical forms from the FS-corpus. Results were filtered to exclude irrelevant cases (i.e., cases in which the signs denoting the minus are rather hyphens or hyphenated nominal groups, cases where the S is confused with the possessive *'s*, and cases where the capital P, S and F are confused with initial capital letters).

To examine the thematic structure of the FS-corpus, the analysis referred one type of clauses as [RHEME], where the part of the clause available for the reader is only the Rheme or the residue, carrying the new information. Note that thematic structure conflates with the concept of the information unit (the system of Given and New) in that the theme is the Given and the rheme is the New information in the clause. When we considered examples in the sub-genre of action in screenplays, the information unit was the guiding principle behind the screenwriter's choice of clauses that conveyed only what is new to the reader, leaving the reader to infer the given information from the preceding context. Thus, a clause would appear without the nominal group which is supposed to be the given information or the theme element.

The study relied on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) Systemic Functional Grammar. According to the SFG approach, the clause in the English language can be viewed in light of three levels of meaning: experiential, interpersonal, and textual. The experiential metafunction is concerned with modeling experiences of the real world, through the configuration of participants, processes, and circumstances. The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with how the text or discourse enacts attitudes and social relations, through the MOOD system of the clause. Finally, the textual metafunction (or the organizational metafunction) is how the text or discourse is structured

and how it is linked in itself and to other discourses outside it.

Systemic Functional Grammar and the analysis of the textual metafunction are ways to see through the organization of information in the clauses of the *action* segment as a sub-genre of screenplays, allowing a comparison between the mono-modal genre of the film script and its multimodal realization as a film.

## 4. Findings

Understanding the lexical dimension of the current corpus of film scripts would facilitate the analysis of the deeper grammatical patterns that are the chief concern of the study. Findings of the FS-corpus are compared to a larger set of corpora. In the following sections the study deals with the linguistics of the screenplay.

## 4.1. Lexical Resources of Screenplays

The analysis looked at five lexical components, namely, vocabulary density, sentence length, readability index, lexical choice of verbs, and script lexical jargon. In order to examine the lexical component of screenplays, a software program was used, namely: The Voyant Tools software https://voyant-tools.org/.

Films use a conversational language (the dialogue segments of the film script), which is supposed to rank low on all three features, and therefore, a high readability index would mean that it is the action constituent of the film script that is responsible for this degree of complexity (Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1**

*Average Word/sentence, Vocabulary Density, and Readability Index*

*of the FS-corpus*

| Screenplay | Avg. w/s | Vocab. density | Readability index |
|---|---|---|---|
| *The Revenant* | 14.0 | 0.100 | 11.416 |
| *Atonement* | 11.7 | 0.160 | 12.970 |
| *Brooklyn* | 10.7 | 0.112 | 12.261 |
| *The Pianist* | 10.6 | 0.128 | 12.902 |
| *Interstellar* | 9.9 | 0.116 | 13.454 |
| *Manchester by the sea* | 7.7 | 0.119 | 13.380 |
| *Lady Bird* | 9.1 | 0.132 | 13.022 |
| *Good Will Hunting* | 9.2 | 0.128 | 13.658 |
| *The Shawshank Redemption* | 9.5 | 0.138 | 11.058 |
| *1917* | 9.6 | 0.117 | 13.091 |
| **Average** | **10.0** | **0.127** | **12.721** |

When considered the readability index of each of the ten scripts separately, it turned out that the numbers are close, ranging from 13.6 to 11.5. This closeness appears in vocabulary density as well, with the highest script scoring 0.160 and the lowest 0.100. This would mean that films tend to recruit relatively similar lexical resources in their scripts. Consider, for example, the case of the SLUG LINE where the abbreviations INT. and EXT. appear at least once every page, being the heading of each scene. Another example of the script jargon resources are the cinematographic elements (elements related to the art of photography, scene shooting, and any camerawork involved in the later process of filmmaking) that provide page and scene transitions, such as CON'T, CUT TO; camera movement directions such as PAN, PAN TO, ROLL; and camera angels such as CLOSE, CLOSE ON, LOW ANGLE, TIGHT ANGLE, ANGLE ON, ANGLE SHIFTS TO, ANGLE WIDENS, ANGLE SLOW PUSH, ANGLE SHIFTS, ANGLE REVEALS. These items are technical terms specific to the script jargon.

To add meaning to the results in Table 4.1., Table 4.2 presents sentence length, vocabulary density, and readability index of a larger corpus; what has been referred to as Reference Corpus 2. There are three sets of numbers: one for GloWbe, another for COCA, and a final

set that combines TV, Soap, NOW, Movies, and Wiki together.

**Table 4.2**

*Avg. w/s, Vocabulary density, and Readability in Samples of Multiple Corpora*

| Corpus | Avg. w/s | Vocab. density | Readability index |
|---|---|---|---|
| *FS* | 10.0 | 0.127 | 12.721 |
| *GloWbe* | 21.66 | 0.1893 | 5.5635 |
| *COCA* | 19.4 | 0.0365 | 4.4985 |
| ***Miscellaneous*** | **16.7** | **0.033** | **2.5335** |

Screenplays, thus, tend to use shorter sentences than the reference corpora. Vocabulary density of screenplays exceeds COCA, News, TV, Soap, NOW, and Wiki, while the GloWbe corpus slightly exceeds the FS-corpus. Despite using fewer words per sentence and the slight differences of vocabulary density, the readability index of screenplays outweighs the specified samples.

To ensure that vocabulary density and sentence length are of no effect on the readability index of screenplays, it is necessary to offer some discussion to highlight their irrelevance. On the one hand, there is the readability index, and vocabulary density and sentence length on the other. The numerical data in Table 4.3 compare the results of the three features between the FS-corpus and what has been established as Reference Corpus 2. Two statistical analysis software programs were used: SPSS and PSPP. A Paired Samples *t-test* was conducted (Table 4.3).

**Table 4.3**

*A Paired Sample t-test for Readability Index, Sentence Length and*

*Vocabulary Density*

| Variables in pairs | | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | **AvgWordS** | 16.9650 | 4 | 5.00569 | 2.50284 |
| | **ReadIndex** | 6.329125 | 4 | 4.4422293 | 2.2211147 |
| Pair 2 | **VocabDensity** | .096450 | 4 | .0756623 | .0378311 |
| | **ReadIndex** | 6.329125 | 4 | 4.4422293 | 2.2211147 |

The table shows two pairs: average word per sentence (or sentence length) with readability index, and vocabulary density with readability index, with the means and standard deviations of the three variables. A paired samples correlation measure was then run, as is shown in Table 4.4.

**Table 4.4**

*A Paired Samples Correlations of Three Lexical Facets of the FS-corpus*

| Variables in pairs | | N | Correlation | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pair 1** | AvgWordS & ReadIndex | 4 | -.763- | .237 |
| **Pair 2** | VocabDensity & ReadIndex | 4 | .471 | .529 |

The *p*-value of the correlation is greater than the threshold of > 0.05 and thus statistically insignificant, both in the FS-corpus and Reference Corpus 2. Finally, the results of the Paired Samples *t-test* were calculated as presented in Table 4.5.

**Table 4.5**

*Paired Sample t-test (readability index between FS-corpus and*

*Reference Corpus 2)*

| | **Paired Differences** | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| | Mean | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| **Pair 1** | 10.635 | 8.873 | 4.436 | -3.4 | 24.7 | 2.39 | 3 | .096 |
| **Pair 2** | -6.232 | 4.407 | 2.203 | -13.2 | .780 | -2.82 | 3 | .066 |

The significance level of the two-tailed *t-test* is 0.096 in pair 1 (sentence length and readability index) and 0.066 in pair 2 (vocabulary density and readability index), both > 0.05 and, therefore, statistically insignificant. However, the *p*-value of pair two (0.066) is very close to significance and worth reporting here. In addition, both the Paired Samples Correlations in Table 4.4 and the two-tailed *t-test* in Table 4.5 have shown that vocabulary density does have a greater effect on readability than sentence length does. These results apply both on the FS-corpus and Reference Corpus 2.

Other lexical elements that are characteristic of screenplays are onomatopoeic devices indicating different types of noises such as CRACK, BANG, BAM, BOOM, THWACK and CREAK – also often in ALL CAPS. These words tend to appear in pairs: BANG, BANG…CREAK, CREAK. There are also behavioral processes that reflect character's feelings and behaviors such as *laugh*, *smile*, *nod*, *gasp*, and *watch* – while some other items such as *watching* and *nodding* are rather relational or material.

A few items related to the cinematography appeared in the Keyword list of the FS-corpus, such as *beat*, *POV* (point of view), *CUT*, *pause*, *Fade*, *SUBTITLES*, *angle*, *revealing*, *reveal*, *camera*, *dissolve*, *dissolve to*, and *TILT*.

## 4.2. Packaging Meaning in Film Scripts

Perhaps the most prominent feature of the grammar of

screenplays is the use of elliptical clauses. Ellipsis usually occurs in one of the three main components: the finite operator, the subject, and the process. Sometimes, ellipsis extends to contain two components in the same clause.

The analysis identified 239 cases of elliptical subjects, 272 elliptical finite operators, and 336 elliptical processes. Following are examples of a few cases of ellipsis:

| | |
|---|---|
| Elliptical subject | [1] `General Erinmore turns around. [-S] Looks at Blake and Schofield` (1917). |
| Elliptical finite operator | [2] `Earth pounded [-F] to atoms, all mounds and holes` (1917). |
| Elliptical Process | [3] `A flicker of fear [-P] on both of their faces` (1917). |
| Elliptical Subject and Finite Operator | [4] `Moving [-S, -F] over it, ears to the dirt, listening` (1917). |

Sometimes ambiguity arises from the deviated graphological devices of the clause-complex, deliberately misplaced, i.e. the reader may interpret the full stop as a comma, in which case the entire clause is one clause-complex, or as a period joining independent clauses as in Example [1]. But screenwriters are not doing this in random. Deviation of the graphological devices is purposeful in these texts. In *Sink. Toilet. Books. Outside the window bars, we hear another TRAIN passing in the night...* (*The Shawshank Redemption,* 1994), there are three inanimate items enclosed within graphological independent structures, using a period. Items here are being separated and foregrounded. In the immediately preceding stretch of text of this example, the camera is moving slowly, or rather panning slowly across the cell, seeing first a *sink*, then a *toilet*, and finally *books.* Elliptical clauses do not only save space on the page, but more importantly, they serve as discourse markers of **fluidity** of the text.

The confinements of the page in a typical screenplay are highly related to scenes in the cognition of the screenwriter. This allows for a very limited space for screenwriters to use full clauses in independent

grammatical environment, and hence the heavy reliance on deletion of elements. Ellipsis may also affect the point of departure of the clause, i.e. the theme element.

Not all clauses have themes, i.e., the subject constituent, which typically includes given or old information (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p.128). Approximately 500 clauses in the FS-corpus were given the status of Rheme, i.e., ones that employed elliptical themes. When we add this number to the total number of clauses with topical themes (in this case, clauses which do have the two components of theme and rheme), the total number of clauses in the ACTION segments of the ten screenplays turns to be approximately 13,412 clauses. This indicates that more often than not that normal syntax is used.

But new information units can be further condensed. Consider from *1917*, `He looks around. Lost` (Mendes & Wilson-Cairns, 2018). It is a full structure with a topical theme [he] and a predicate [looks around] as a Rheme followed by *Lost* in a graphological independent clause. Schofield is now in Ecoust, a French town occupied by the Germans, and it is night. Darkness overtakes the entire scene. The sense of loss is being put in the foreground, both for Schofield and the viewer. He knows that he is in Ecoust and that the town is on his way to the 2nd Devons (a British battalion south of the French town of Ecoust where he was meant to deliver a message to prevent a massacre). But the pressure of reaching the 2nd Devons on time before the battle begins, together with the darkness of Ecoust, now occupied by the Germans, leaves Schofield *lost*. Following are three examples of condensed new information units:

- Dark. Traffic outside. (Darabont, 1994).
- A rolling landscape. The rustling of leaves, and birdsong. (Mendes & Wilson-Cairns, 2018).
- Darkness now. Silence`.` (Darabont, 1994).

In Section 4.3, the study presents the analysis related to Transitivity in the action of screenplays, with a particular focus on the Process as being at the core of this research.

## 4.3. Transitivity in the action of screenplays

On the experiential level, when comparing the six major types of processes of Material, Relational, Mental, Existential, Verbal and Behavioral, the category of material process takes over with a clear gap between the material world of the narrative and the relational, which comes second in dominance.

Materiality in film scripts outweighs other types of processes because the purpose of the screenplay as a text is to visualize movement for readers. There is an obvious emphasis on the world of doing, the physical world, where participants' actions are the primary concern of the screenwriter. On the screen, two aspects constitute the primary focus of the visual composition: subjects depicted in the frame and movement.

The interplay of materiality and movement is essential for the development of the line of the story through the physical progression of the script. This can be viewed as a physical progression of events and actions through time and space. There are 12,060 cases of material verbs, occupying a lexical space of 4.8 percent of the total number of words in the FS-corpus. This 4.8 percent may be regarded as the mechanism or the drive that propels the stories forward as cinematic narratives. The script as a genre, thus, does not tell the story, rather shows the story through the materialistic unfolding of the narrative action before the actual visualization of the story on the screen.

Still, when we think of films as we see them on screens, it is obvious that not every bit of the story, or rather not all the pictures we see are mobile – many shots are static, where neither characters, environs, nor even the camera itself is in motion. The categories of relational and mental processes come to effect in those parts of the screenplay as a pre-cinematographic work. Because relational verbs construe a state of being, the world of abstract relations or the world of being, there is an urgent need for a screenwriter to establish a state of being such as *the cons are gathered around a table* before the screenwriter engages them into the state of doing something.

## 4.4. Thematic Structure of the Clause

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p. 105), there are three main types of themes in the English clause: *topical*, *interpersonal*, and *textual*. In the sections below, the analysis looks at the three types, respectively.

### 4.4.1. Topical Themes

Because stories evolve around characters, objects, and places (the elements which can serve as a subject of the clause and thus as topical themes) topical themes in the corpus of film scripts were found exceedingly dominant than other types of themes. The topical theme can be animate (i.e. characters) or inanimate (i.e. props, places, incidents), but the former type exceeds the latter because, again, stories are primarily about characters. But other types of themes can also serve the story, such as interpersonal themes, and, more importantly, textual themes.

### 4.4.2. Interpersonal Themes

An interpersonal theme is an element in the point of departure of the clause, which inherently proceeds the topical theme. These may be vocatives (***Jane***, *where are you?*), modal adjuncts (***certainly***, *she isn't smiling*), comment adjuncts (***unfortunately***, *this comment was loud enough for Casey to hear*), and finite operators (items that constitute polar interrogatives of 'yes' and 'no'). The interpersonal category of themes plays a less distinctive role than the textual and the topical in the FS-corpus in that the total number of all the identified interpersonal themes does not exceed 39 cases.

The analysis provided in this section reveals two aspects of screenplays. First, action in a film script does not rely on emotional affects and subjective attitudes such as the use of *Jesus*, *God*, *unfortunately*, *oh man* and *gratefully*. The screenwriters' judgments and attitudes towards the unfolding events of action seem irrelevant. Because comment adjuncts are by nature subjective, or rather they add to the load of subjectivity in discourse, screenwriters distance themselves from them for the purpose of factual description.

This takes us to the second aspect of screenplays, namely, the

degree of objectivity construed by modal adjuncts such as *almost*, *it's clear that*, *softly*, and other circumstances of manner in the thematic foreground of the clause. Note that a circumstance of any type may serve as a topical theme, but because these modal particles are usually followed by an element with a more thematic prominence in the clause such as a process or a character as a participant, they are considered interpersonal themes that cataphorically introduce an element of primary focus.

It is the objective load these modal adjuncts afford that weakens the subjectivity of comment adjuncts, drawing actions and events within the framework of the physical world, rather than the attitudinal, i.e., while the physical world is fixed, the attitudinal is illusive. For example, in *God, this is a terrible place to be* (Mendes & Wilson-Cairns, 2018), the reader is left with an undefined description of the place. In *Slowly, the match burns out* (Mendes & Wilson-Cairns, 2018), the circumstance of manner renders a concrete view of the on-going burning of the match.

With a similar effect, the mood adjunct *almost*, in *Almost continuous sounds of distant shouts and screams* (Mendes & Wilson-Cairns, 2018), places the readers in the character's world by making them hear the same uncertain voices the character is hearing because the sounds are blurred at a distance.

### 4.4.3. Textual Themes

The findings revealed that textual themes provided action in screenplays with: i) *transitions* between scenes and shots (*then*, *and then*, *a few moments later*), ii) *continuation* of the same shot or dialogue (*by now*, *as now*), or iii) *preservation* of an action or event parallel to a new rising action or event (*meanwhile*, *as*, *just as*).

The most frequent structural theme, as one type of textual themes, was found to be one that construed parallel events, *as*, and its synonym, *while*, which together occur 464 times – a number that amounts to almost half of the entire structural themes in the action parts of the FS-corpus. This suggests that there is a need for screenwriters to describe simultaneous events. The screen is a busy

domain with multiple things happening at the same time, for which screenwriters will need devices such as *while*, *as*, *when*, and *meanwhile* to place such parallel events in one clause-complex. On the other hand, there are transitional devices that tie sequential events together. For example, the particle *then* co-occurs with *and* and *but*. While the particles *then* and *and then* construe a sequential transition of events, *but then* adds an adversative element to the sequential transitioning.

One of the most inherent resources of films is the concept of *temporality*. The analysis showed a wide range of textual themes that construe temporal relations between clauses, clauses either in a paratactic relation or a hypotactic one. Temporality occupies almost half of all the textual themes identified in the corpus, exactly 869 cases of temporal textual themes from a total number of 1682 textual themes. Following is a list ordered according to frequency:

*as, then, while, when, (not) until, and then, finally, later, now/ by now/ but now/ as now, just as, before, again, after a beat, but then, after a moment, meanwhile, as soon as, eventually, and again, and when, soon, (and) still, once again, (at) last, at this point, at once, instantly, but this time, the moment, having done this, in that moment, a few moments later, seconds later.*

In addition to the list above, the word *suddenly* as a textual theme was found salient in film scripts. There is a need for a story to present sudden changes of the events, which, in turn, results in shifts and changes of the plot.

Writing here is not a matter of stylistic variation, rather a standard procedure to carry on descriptive storylines. There seems to be zero evidence of screenwriters attempting to stylize their manuscripts, more than there is a need to drive the story forward by the most standard types of transitional words and textual themes, and hence the least marked syntactic choices. There is a wide variety of conjunctions, modal adjuncts, transition words and connectors in the English language; still, there is little trace for items other than the ones which are congruent and unmarked.

Up to this point, the analysis showed what a Corpus Linguistics analysis may reveal about the tools screenwriters utilize in the sub-genre of action in screenplays. With the focus directed towards the linguistic constituents of the action segments of the ten specified film scripts in general, and on the type of processes and the nature of the thematic component of the clause in particular.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The current research regarded the language of film scripts as a challenge to screenwriters because of the standards imposed by film production companies. For this, the success of a film as a visual discourse would depend chiefly on the quality of the script chosen for production. The analysis demonstrated that film scripts are technical texts that aim primarily at turning the story into film, but this does not preclude the verity that it is also a literary form, confirming Richsand's (2017) view. Unlike Richsand, however, Film scripts were shown to be closer to technical texts than pure literary forms by virtue of the similar linguistic features that have been pinpointed by Corpus Linguistics in the present sample.

Congruency and unmarkedness, for example, are obvious properties of the syntax of the screenplay genre. This confirms Macdonald and Macdonald's (2013) view of this type of texts as using standard language. It is expected of writing for film production to have little to do with playing with the style on the clausal level, i.e. a syntax deprived from the stylized lexicon and structure.

The choices of screenwriters tend to be pre-affected by the version of the narrative or the story in their cognition. We may assume that the film as a visual story progresses from the screenwriter's cognition before becoming a film script the way the film progresses from the script. For this reason, a screenplay, being a technical text that is primarily meant for screen adaptation, will make use of straightforward linguistic structures. Such linguistic choices would, first of all, rely on strategic lexical items such as action verbs and words that are technical to screen production.

A degree of similarity is expected among film scripts, both on the

lexical and structural levels. Uniformity of the lexicon and syntax is the norm. For example, scene entries and transitions such as *cut to*, *fade in/out*, and *dissolve to* are indispensible choices for the screenwriter because the world of modern cinema depends on montage and the cutting of visual elements that yields the visual story. From this point, adding to what has been put forward by Bazin (2004) in a comparison between the art of novel and the seventh art of the cinema, film as a visual genre has at its foundation a guiding script that constitutes the story in its semi-literary form.

A film script on the other hand has all the potentiality of a literary work the same way a novel does by virtue of the fact that the script does have characters as its primary focus, events that are either linear or non-linear, a plot that undergoes constant change, and a logical structure (what is known in the world of screenwriting as *acts*). For instance, in the same way a novel has a beginning, middle and an end, a film script has a three-act structure that constitutes its beginning, middle and end. The difference in this respect is that while there is no guiding principle of the location of the transitions between the three phases of a novel, a film script does have specific locations for transitioning from one act to another.

This is in no way the only dichotomy between pure dramatic works such novels and plays on the one hand and a screenplay on the other. Perhaps, and more significantly, it is the technicality of the lexical and grammatical choices of a screenplay that draws a clear distinction between writing for the screen and other genres of creative writing. The concise syntax of the clause is an asset to screenwriters, unlike the license given to novelists which provides them with as much freedom as they may need to construct their sentences.

Accordingly, the present study regards a film script as the *premise* of the story and not its theme. While a premise is a short piece of text that describes the actual happenings of the story in functional terms, a theme is its moral (Mckee, 1997). Mckee also confirms that the premise is the tangible summary of a story in one sentence, which should also be the antecedent of the theme. The material aspect of the

story as designated by the film script is analogous to the premise and it is this tangibility of the text that promotes it to film production.

In successful film scripts, a theme is inferred, not stated. It is inferred through the totality of the events and actions described on the page and rarely through the lexical choices. Perhaps the drawback of Hunter and Smith's (2015) study is their attempt to quantify elements of screenplay writing through a quantitative design. Stories that are written for the specific purpose of the screen are expected to have their themes fully materialized after their multimodal production on the screen, not in the primordial stage of script writing.

The term *action* in cinema is not arbitrary. The dynamicity of action verbs and material processes is one determiner of quality when it comes to the lexical component of a script. The study also established that there is a uniformity of the clausal structure among the ten screenplays. This is obvious, first, through the dominant presence of the simple present tense. The use of simple present creates immediacy of the dramatic action, i.e., the reader is invited to be in the here-and-now of the story, or, put clearly, the story is being processed as though happening in the same spatiotemporal world of the reader.

An unexpected result of the present analysis concerning tense and modality is the scarcity of the expressions of modality in the action of the ten scripts. According to Systemic Functional Grammar, there are two dimensions of modal meaning, *propositions* and *proposals*. These constitute the dividing line between probability and usuality (proposition), on the one hand, and obligation and inclination (proposal) on the other (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, pp. 176-178). Proposals are absent in the FS-corpus, except of course in the dialogical sub-genre. There is, however, an insignificant presence of propositions.

Murtagh et al., (2009) showed that there was structural uniformity between texts written for the screen and those written for the TV. We may add here that structural uniformity is rather more obvious on the genre-internal level, i.e. uniformity among film scripts, which is dictated by the sameness of tense and scarcity of modality. But

Murtagh et al. were most concerned with the grand structure of the transitions between shots, scenes and sequences and not with the micro structure of the clause. Because screenwriters are bound to the principles of the industry of filmmaking, it is natural that grand structures such as scene transitions to be alike among film scripts since these are dictated by the strict formatting of the genre. What the present study adds here is, again, a genre-internal homogeneity of the micro structure of the clause.

There is a dual purpose of a screenplay. First, it is a manuscript that should provide a full, mature story with characters, events, actions, and dialogue through a typical three-act structure of a beginning, middle and an end. Second, it is a document that provides filmmakers (including producers, directors, cinematographers, gaffers and cameramen) with the necessary requirements of the actual making of a visual story. Because the manuscript is limited to a document length that ranges from 90 to 120 pages, *densification* is a primary requirement for selection and production.

It is the link between the mono-modal film script and the film that shapes the screenwriter's linguistic choices. Even on the graphlogical level, the organization of the clause is affected by the intended development of the visual story.

## Conclusion

The present study attempted an analysis of ten film scripts from a Systemic Functional perspective, incorporating Corpus Linguistics to understand the linguistic peculiarities of the genre of screenplay. The study pinpointed a gap in the available body of literature that studied the genre from a pure linguistic angle. Besides, the genre of screenwriting is controlling an industry of film productions that come at high cost for such filmic incorporations, and, hence, understanding the micro structure of successful film scripts was considered a valuable contribution in this regard.

The textual analysis relied on qualitative and quantitative designs that targeted three components of the clause of the genre of screenplays, namely: the lexical components of the screenplay, the thematic

organization of the message of the clause, and the processes screenwriters utilize in describing events and actions of the story.

The quantitative analysis of the ten scripts showed that screenplays tend to use standard sentence length, vocabulary density and readability, features that did not show much distinction between screenplays and other selected corpora of written and spoken language. The qualitative analysis of screenplay clause, on the other hand, revealed that it is the technicality of the script that dictates screenwriters' choice of vocabulary and their use of standard language whose primary purpose is to assure the practicality of the screenplay – a quality that would facilitate the later stages of film production.

Evidence was found regarding the use of particular linguistic moves that pointed at brevity of the clause and fluidity of its structure. A film script, more than any type of creative writing, has to have unity in its grand structure (i.e., beats, scenes, sequences, and acts) in order for the story to unfold consistently. This unity is chiefly dictated by the standards of the industry that prefer certain formats, graphology, and an urging need of brevity of the clause and straightforwardness of the style. For this reason, the present analysis pointed at the fact that screenwriters tend to employ congruent grammatical forms and unmarked clausal structure.

## Limitations of the Study

Because cinema is a global industry, generalizing the present findings is limited to western film scripts and films, in particular to those written in English and produced by international film corporations. The findings may not also be applicable to cinematic works before the 1990s due to the fact that the time span of the present sample ranges from 1994 to 2000.

## Recommendations for Further Research

Future research on the genre of screenplay and film should focus on the analysis of the grand structure, i.e. the act, in order to ascertain the function of each act in the development of the story, along with the role of other smaller units such as scenes and sequences. Applying the

fields of syntax and semantics would reveal the meaning and purpose of these units. Another aspect of film should also be targeted; the notion of *reality* in motion picture and what are the degrees of reality the different film genres yield. Understanding films in light of the portion of reality integrated in the different genres would reveal what types of films that most shape social behaviors and attitudes in different cultures.

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