

Beyond Words: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Approach to Silence, Omission, And Trauma in Literary Narrative

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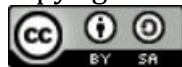
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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate how silence and omission in literary trauma narratives are linguistically encoded through transitivity structures within the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. While prior research has examined trauma disclosure and silence as social or psychological phenomena, the systematic grammatical encoding of omission has received less attention. Using Hanya Yanagihara's *a Little Life* as a case study, a qualitative textual analysis was performed following a three-step process: identifying passages relevant to trauma, segmenting clauses and coding transitivity across six process categories, and aggregating and interpreting patterns. A total of 149 clauses were examined. The analysis revealed 64 instances of omission, demonstrating that omission is a systematic component of the data. Omission patterns include Senser omission in 23% of Mental processes, Actor omission in 33% of Material processes, Verbiage omission in 50% of Verbal processes, Carrier omission in 14% of Relational processes, and Process omission in 50% of Existential processes. Existential and verbal processes comprise only 1% and 8% of all clauses, respectively. These results demonstrate that silence in trauma narratives represents a structured grammatical decision rather than a mere absence of language, providing a replicable framework for analyzing omission and advancing both linguistic analysis and trauma studies

Keywords: *Systemic Functional Linguistics, transitivity, silence, omission, trauma narratives, literary linguistics*

INTRODUCTION

Psychology, psychiatry, and literary studies have all long studied trauma (Herman and Lewis, 1997). But little is known about the language processes by which trauma is portrayed in narrative, especially when it comes to what is not spoken. Although trauma survivors' verbalization of their experiences has been the subject of much research (Kolk and A., 2014),

the linguistic characteristics of silence and omission have gotten relatively little systematic attention. Trauma is often represented through gaps, ellipses, and unspeakable contents, making silence central to trauma narratives (Caruth and Cathy, 1996). By analyzing the linguistic turn in trauma studies and showing how language, including what is left unsaid, organizes traumatic experience in literary stories, recent research has supported this approach (Harmash et al., 2026). However, despite these theoretical developments, the use of language frameworks that can precisely analyze silence and omission has only recently started (Edward *et al.*, 2025).

Building on this fundamental knowledge, the difficulty of expressing trauma in language involves both structure and content. Because traumatic memories are encoded differently from typical narrative memories, trauma survivors often report being unable to completely express their experiences, not because the events have been forgotten (LaCapra and Dominick, 2001). Linguistically, this encoding appears as broken phrase structures, absent agents, omitted participants, and fragmented syntax (Alruwaili *et al.*, 2025). However, rather than focusing on what is structurally absent, the majority of linguistic analyses of trauma narratives to date have concentrated on what is clearly said (Pennebaker and W., 1997). Although trauma is often considered “unspeakable,” SFL does not attempt to fully capture trauma itself, but rather examines the linguistic traces through which trauma is partially represented, fragmented, or silenced in discourse. To address potential interpretive bias in identifying omission, the analysis is guided by explicit transitivity-based criteria for determining expected participants, drawing on established SFL frameworks to ensure systematic and theoretically grounded coding. In order to close this gap, the current study suggests a systematic methodology for examining silence and omission as structured grammatical decisions within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

Recent research in SFL has shown the significance of transitivity in capturing experience across several domains, laying the analytical groundwork for such a framework (Nugraha, 2024). Transitivity analysis looks at how participant roles like Actor, Senser, Goal, and Phenomenon, as well as process kinds including material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes, encode experiencing meaning (Khusnul Aisaro and Suhardi, 2023). Numerous studies, such as comparative narrative analysis (Megah, 2019),

ideological positioning in political speeches (Qasim *et al.*, 2018), linguistic choices in literary texts (Darani, 2014), and persuasive techniques in discourse (Akingbelue, 2025), emphasize the use of transitivity in narrative, discourse, and ideological analysis. Simultaneously, others use transitivity analysis to media, social concerns, and trauma-related discourse, including news stories about child abuse (Badrul Halim and Maktiar Singh, 2023), accounts of survivors of natural disasters (Irawanto, 2018), psychological violence against women (de Oliveira *et al.*, 2021), and sexual harassment in media texts (Situmorang, Rangkuti, and Perangin-Angin, 2025). When considered collectively, the state-of-the-art shows that experience, ideology, and trauma representation have been extensively studied in a variety of speech contexts using Systemic Functional Linguistics, especially transitivity analysis.

Recent studies have directly linked transitivity patterns to trauma representation, furthering this line of inquiry. One study showed that fragmented syntax and agentless constructions linguistically mimic the dissociation typical of traumatic experience, demonstrating how war trauma is ideologically encoded through transitivity choices in post-9/11 fiction (Sanchez, Fouques and Romo, 2023). Another study looked at the syntactic reality of trauma and found that disturbed phrase structures and absent agents serve as linguistic reminders of psychological injuries (Kleim *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the predominance of transitivity as an analytical tool in recent SFL investigations is further supported by research trends (Istiqomah and Abdurrahman, 2025).

Transitivity has proved useful in literary and psychological contexts in addition to generic SFL applications, where it has been demonstrated to encode mental states, identity creation, and experiencing meaning. Transitivity patterns (Fissilmi, Supatmiwati, and Abdussamad, 2025), SFL's contributions to literary text analysis (Kadwa and Alshenqeeti, 2020), experiential meaning in historical novels (Hoang, 2024), corpus stylistic studies of prison literature (Yousif, 2025), and contextual and situational meaning in discourse (Noreen, Rathore, and Qasim, 2025) have all been used to study mental health issues in fiction. Recent studies also show that omission, fragmentation, syntactic compression, and abstract material processes may represent traumatic experience (Kurzon, 2007). In a similar vein, empirical research on the utterances of trauma survivors shows that abstract material processes are commonly employed to disassociate speakers from potentially fatal situations.

Instead of disclosing information directly, this linguistic tactic uses omission and indirect representation (Zulprianto & Fanany, 2023).

More recent research has concentrated on the connection between language, power, and trauma representation, moving from specific cognitive patterns to more general socio-ideological dimensions (Zalbidea *et al.*, 2022). Research shows how transitivity shapes agency, resistance, and ideological positioning in a variety of settings, including historical trauma and conflict narratives, like the portrayal of Partition (Riessman and Kohler, 2008). Clinical linguistic research has found unique indicators of psychic trauma in spoken language, such as incomplete utterances, repeats, quiet pauses, hesitation pauses, and non-literal language, which challenge conventional interpretations of the unthinkable. These results offer trauma survivors' empirical confirmation that linguistic disruptions and silences are structural characteristics rather than simple absences (Sanchez, Fouques and Romo, 2023).

Scholars have extended the research beyond verbal language entirely, arguing that creative, multimodal, and nonlinguistic modes of expression that capture what is left unsaid are preferable to a strictly linguistic viewpoint for depicting trauma and sorrow (Zalbidea *et al.*, 2022). This issue is particularly pertinent to literary narratives, where ellipses, typographic disruption, and visual characteristics convey traumatic experience beyond linguistic articulation. Although transitivity has been frequently employed to investigate how language encodes experience, ideology, and identity, silence and omission remain underexplored, as most research prioritizes what is openly expressed. While phenomena such as fragmented syntax, agentless formulations, and participant absence have been recognized, they are rarely explored as systematic linguistic patterns across transitivity process types, despite their potential to function as meaningful linguistic choices that shape how trauma is represented through what is grammatically withheld as well as what is explicitly expressed.

Trauma linguistics can be generally separated into three approaches: analysis of explicit trauma narrative, pragmatic studies of silence in interaction, and SFL-based analyses of grammatical representation. However, none consistently regard omission and silence as organized linguistic choices. As a result, a rigorous language framework for understanding

omission in trauma narratives is currently absent. Prior SFL research has focused on present participants and processes, leaving omission little addressed, particularly in respect to its psychological repercussions. For example, Senser omission (“It was remembered”) may show dissociation, whereas Actor omission (“The wound was inflicted”) may reflect lack of agency. These patterns show that omission works as a significant language resource rather than a mere absence. This study consequently presents an SFL-based approach that reconceptualizes omission as a systematic linguistic element in trauma depiction. While based on a single literary book, it presents a theoretically grounded and possibly applicable paradigm for assessing omission across trauma narratives.

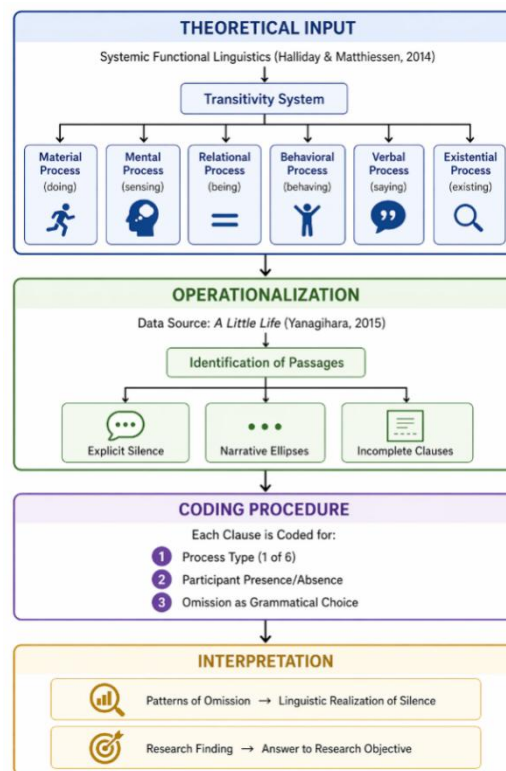


Chart 1. Conceptual–Analytical Model of Transitivity-Based Analysis

As demonstrated in chart 1, the conceptual framework provides a systematic pathway from theory to interpretation. The theoretical input level supplies the transitivity system with its six process types. The operationalization level identifies passages of silence, ellipsis, and incomplete clauses within *A Little Life*. The coding procedure level assigns each clause a process type and records participant omission as a grammatical choice. Finally, the

interpretation level aggregates these patterns to answer the research objective. This framework ensures that silence and omission are analyzed not as mere absences but as meaningful linguistic choices.

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to investigate how silence and omission in trauma narratives are linguistically formed through transitivity structures, this study takes a qualitative, descriptive method employing textual analysis based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The book *A Little Life* serves as the main source of information (Yanagihara, 2015), providing a focused case study rather than a basis for broad generalization across all trauma narratives. This work was chosen because it offers rich linguistic data for examining omission as a purposeful stylistic and psychological device. The protagonist, Jude St. Francis, endures childhood trauma that is gradually disclosed through narrative gaps, ellipses, and explicit silences. The transitivity system within SFL's ideational metafunction serves as the analytical framework (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Transitivity studies six process types—material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential—each related with participant roles such as Actor, Goal, Senser, and Phenomenon. In this study, omission is defined as the absence or backgrounding of an expected participant and is considered as a valid grammatical decision.

Data collection and analysis followed three stages. First, the text was read again to identify passages having ellipses, omissions, and narrative gaps relating to the protagonist's trauma. Second, selected texts were split into clauses and categorized for process type, participants, and circumstances, with attention to omitted and inferred features. Third, coded data were aggregated by process type and omission frequency and analyzed in respect to narrative context, including point of view and chronological structure (Rose *et al.*, 2022). This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach centered in Systemic Functional Linguistics, using clause-level transitivity analysis as the major tool. Omission is recognized based on theoretically expected participant responsibilities for each process type (e.g., Actor, Senser) following Halliday and Matthiessen (2014).

Coding was completed methodically using these preset categories to ensure consistency in recognizing explicit and implicit structures. Validity is ensured by theory-

driven analysis founded on recognized SFL frameworks, while reliability is supported by consistent coding techniques and repeated close readings to minimize interpretative bias. Although the study adopts a single-coder design, explicit criteria and processes enhance the replicability of the results.

The research process for this study is illustrated in Chart 2 below.

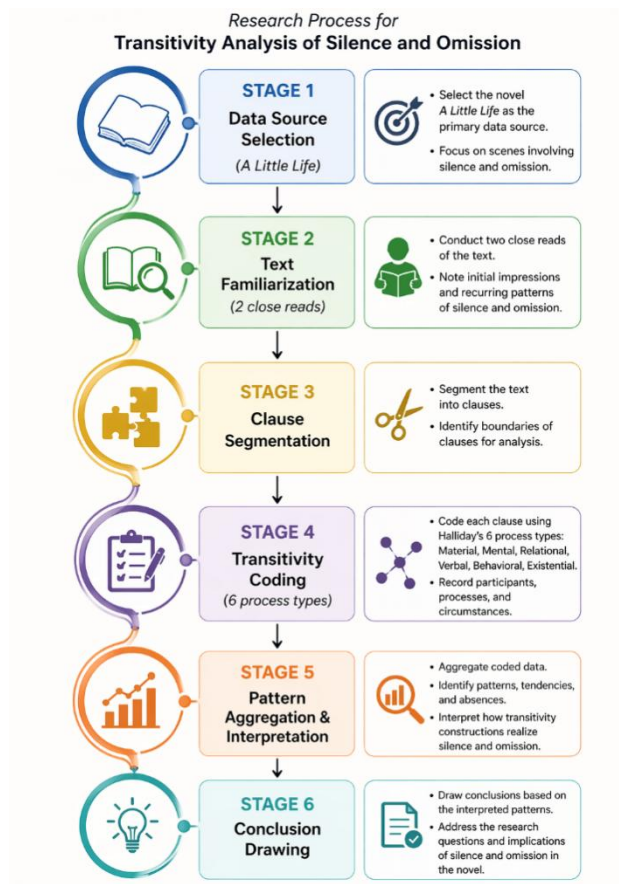


Chart 2. Research Process for Transitivity Analysis of Silence and Omission

DISCUSSION

The transitivity patterns in *A Little Life* are analyzed in this section using clause data taken from the book. The research objective, which uses a modern literary trauma narrative as the case study, directs the analysis: to investigate how silence and omission in trauma narratives are linguistically formed through transitivity structures within the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework. The analysis went through three stages in accordance with the analytical process outlined in the Research Method section. In the first stage, two full readings of *A Little Life* were used to find passages that contained ellipses, omissions,

silence, or narrative gaps pertaining to the protagonist's pain. In the second stage, each marked passage was divided into clauses, and each clause was coded for participants (Actor, Goal, Senser, Phenomenon, Sayer, Verbiage, Carrier, Attribute, Behavior, Existent), circumstances, and process type (material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, existential), with systematic attention to omitted participants and implied processes. While trauma may also be conveyed through multimodal and nonlinguistic features beyond language, this study focuses specifically on clause-level transitivity patterns as one linguistic dimension of trauma representation. In stage three, coded cases were aggregated by process type and omission frequency. Patterns were then interpreted in light of the narrative context. Table 1 and Chart 3 below show the outcomes of Stage 3.

Table 1. Distribution of Transitivity Process Types and Omission Patterns

Process Type	Total Clauses	Percentage	Omission Type	Frequency	Percentage (within type)
Mental	52	35%	Senser omission	12	23%
			Phenomenon omission	8	15%
Material	45	30%	Actor omission	15	33%
			Passive voice (Actor omitted)	10	22%
Relational	28	19%	Carrier omitted	4	14%
			Attribute omitted	3	11%
Existential	2	1%	Existent omitted	1	50%
Verbal	12	8%	Verbiage omission	6	50%
			Sayer omission	3	25%
Behavioral / Mixed	10	7%	Behavior omitted	2	20%
Total	149	100%		64	

A total of 64 instances of omission were found in the 149 clauses examined across all process types, indicating that omission is a common and organized aspect of the data. Omission is dispersed over several process categories rather than happening infrequently, suggesting that the narrative's silence is grammatically created through repeated patterns of participant and process absence. The following sections provide a detailed analysis of each process type and its associated omission patterns

Mental Processes

Table 1 demonstrates that 52 out of 149 sentences (35% of the total data) are mental processes. This is the greatest category of all process kinds, suggesting that internal experience, feeling, thinking, remembering, and perceiving rather than external action is the

main way that trauma is portrayed in *A Little Life*. Two patterns of omission appear in these 52 Mental clauses. First, 12 clauses (or 23% of mental processes) include Senser omissions. The person who feels, thinks, or senses is known as the Senser. These interpretations are treated as functional linguistic patterns within the narrative rather than direct psychological diagnoses, reducing subjective interpretation by grounding the analysis in established transitivity roles. When it is absent, consciousness experiences take place without a recognizable experiencer. This omission grammatically produces silence as dissociation: trauma exists, but there is no "who" to whom it belongs. Second, eight clauses (15% of mental processes) have phenomenon omission. The content of consciousness, which is felt, thought, or perceived, is known as the phenomenon. When it's absent, the protagonist senses something, but it's unclear what that something is. In terms of grammar, this defines silence as the lack of content. When taken as a whole, these omissions show how the linguistic realization of silence in trauma narratives occurs when Sensers and Phenomena are absent from Mental process clauses.

Material Processes

According to Table 1, 45 out of 149 clauses (about 30% of the total data) are material processes. The fact that this category is the second largest suggests that, although less important than interior experience, action and happening are nevertheless crucial to the depiction of trauma. There are two patterns of omission in these forty-five important clauses. First, 15 clauses (33% of Material procedures) include an actor omission. The person who acts is the actor. When it is absent, actions take place without a recognizable agent. Grammatically speaking, this omission presents quite as a lack of agency and passivity: things occur, but no one is taking action. Second, ten clauses (22% of Material processes) contain passive voice with an absent actor. The actor is grammatically veiled in passive formulations like "he had been changed" (Clause 83) and "his cuttings were set aside" (Clause 95).

This backgrounding of the agency eliminates accountability even more. When taken as a whole, these omissions show how absent actors and misplaced agency inside material process clauses are linguistically realized in trauma narratives. Instead of taking action, the protagonist becomes someone to whom things happen. It should be noted, however, that this

analysis does not claim direct authorial intention or psychological equivalence to real trauma cognition; rather, it interprets these patterns as textual and functional linguistic realizations within the narrative, which may reflect but do not definitively establish stylistic choices, conventional grammatical structures (such as passive constructions), or broader representational strategies of trauma.

Relational Processes

Relational processes make up 28 out of 149 clauses (19% of the entire data), according to Table 1. Rather than actions or events, these clauses encode states of being, having, and identifying. Two patterns of omission appear in these 28 relational clauses. First, four clauses (14% of relational processes) contain carrier omission. The entity being described is the Carrier. When it is absent, states of being are described in the absence of an entity possessing those states. Grammatically, this omission creates silence as an incomplete identity: something is becoming "less possible" (Clause 90), but it is impossible to identify what that something is. Second, three clauses (11% of relational processes) include attribute omission. The quality or description given to the carrier is called the attribute. The description loses its complete referent when it is incomplete, as in the case of "destructive" in Clause 132 without a designated target. This defines silence grammatically as the absence of the object of description. When taken as a whole, these omissions show how incomplete Attributes and absent Carriers inside Relational process clauses linguistically realize silence in trauma narratives. Trauma turns into a state of being without a distinct object or subject.

Verbal Processes

Table 1 demonstrates that only 12 out of 149 clauses (8% of the total data) are verbal processes. Speech acts are noticeably rare in sections of trauma portrayal, which makes this low frequency noteworthy in and of itself. There are two patterns of omission in these twelve verbal sentences. First, six sentences (or 50% of verbal processes) have verbatim omissions. The content of what is spoken is known as the verbiage. Speech acts lack content since it is absent from half of all verbal clauses. In terms of grammar, this omission creates silence as empty speech: the protagonist speaks, but the reader is not privy to what he says. This pattern is demonstrated in clause 123, "Jude communicated to them," where the act of communication is claimed but the message is not. Second, three clauses (or 25% of verbal

processes) include Sayer omissions. The speaker is the Sayer. Its absence indicates that there is no recognizable speaker for the demand for speech, especially in imperative phrases like "Talk to me" (Clause 126). This constructs quite as a command without a commander in terms of grammar. When taken as a whole, these omissions show how the language realization of silence in trauma narratives occurs through the absence of Sayers and Verbiage in Verbal Process clauses. There is communication, but it is either agentless or contentless.

Existential Processes

Only two of the 149 clauses (1% of the total data) are existential processes, as Table 1 demonstrates. This great rarity is important since trauma representation virtually completely avoids the process of establishing existence. One pattern of omission appears in these two existential phrases. One clause (50% of existential processes) contains a process omission. The required existential process "there was" or "there is" is completely absent from Clause 101, "The suppuration, the sick, fishy scent, the little gash..." A list of nouns is given to the reader, but there is no grammatical procedure to support their existence. The act of expressing "there is" is too direct for trauma depiction, and this omission grammatically builds silence as the absence of being itself. Furthermore, the Existent (a tree) is described by what it lacks in the remaining Existential phrase (phrase 91: "In his every day stands a tree, black and dying") "black" (absence of color) and "dying" (absence of vitality). However, given the extremely low frequency of existential processes in the dataset, these proportional findings should be interpreted cautiously, as they are based on a very small number of instances and may reflect localized textual features rather than a stable or generalizable pattern; larger or more diverse corpora would be required to confirm whether similar proportions hold. In terms of grammar, this defines silence as the presence of absence. When taken as a whole, these omissions show how silence in trauma tales is linguistically realized through existence defined by negation and absent existential processes. It is too painful to make a straightforward claim about the act of existence itself.

Behavioral Processes

Ten out of 149 clauses (7% of the total data) are behavioral processes, according to Table 1. Physiological and psychological actions including shaking, staring, healing, and fighting are encoded in these clauses. One pattern of omission appears in these ten

behavioral clauses. Two clauses (20% of behavioral processes) have Behavior omissions. The person who engages in the behavior is known as the Behavior. When it is absent, actions take place without a recognizable performer. Grammatically speaking, this omission creates silence as disembodied action: trembling, healing, or fighting occur, but there is no body associated with these actions. The Behavior ("He") appears in clause 81, "He had recovered," however it is completely absent from other behavioral clauses in the data set. This pattern shows that missing Behavers within Behavioral process clauses is another way that silence in trauma narratives is linguistically realized. Even involuntary bodily movements, like shaking or staring, can be grammatically separated from the one experiencing them.

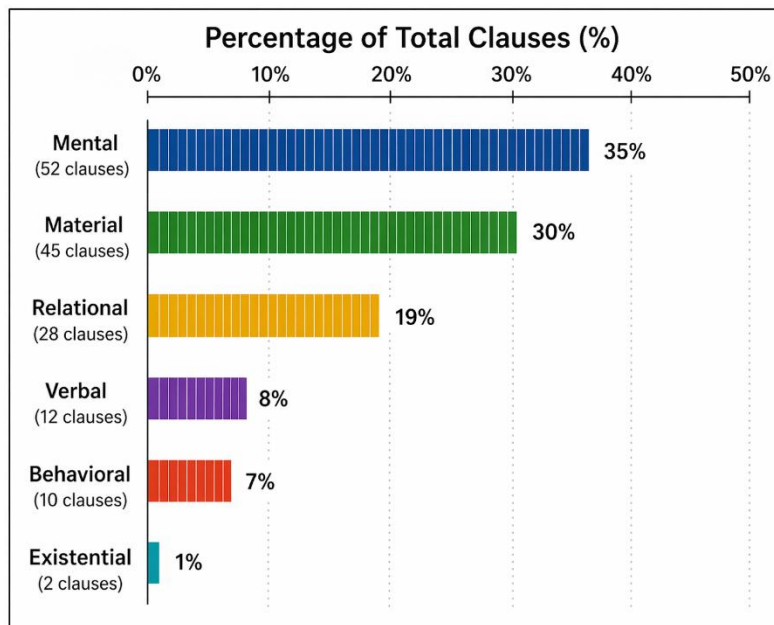


Chart 3. Percentage Distribution of Process Types in A Little Life (N=149 clauses)

The percentage distribution of six transitivity process types among 149 clauses found in A Little Life's trauma-related passages is shown in Chart 3. The information shows a distinct hierarchy: At 35% (52 clauses), mental processes predominate, followed by material processes at 30% (45 phrases), relational processes at 19% (28 clauses), verbal processes at 8% (12 clauses), behavioral processes at 7% (10 clauses), and existential processes at just 1% (2 clauses). By demonstrating how silence and omission are linguistically generated through transitivity mechanisms, this distribution directly addresses the research goal. Trauma is mainly portrayed as an inside experience feeling, thinking, remembering, and

perceiving rather than an exterior action, as seen by the dominance of Mental processes over Material processes. Because trauma occurs inside the protagonist's mind and cannot be seen or confirmed by others, this grammatical choice itself creates silence. More importantly, the research goal is directly addressed by the extremely low frequency of verbal processes (only 8%): speech acts are grammatically uncommon in trauma depiction. The protagonist rarely speaks, and Table 2 will demonstrate that even when verbal processes take place, 50% of the time, the verbiage is left out. At the most fundamental level of grammar, silence is the lack of verbal activity.

Additionally, by demonstrating that the act of affirming existence itself is nearly completely avoided in trauma representation, the near-absence of existential processes at just 1% addresses the research purpose. The trauma experienced by the protagonist is never described as "there is pain" or "there exists a wound" since even the grammatical act of stating "there is" is too clear and bold for a story that depicts the unimaginable. Rather, relational processes at 19% encode trauma as states of being; phrases like "you are sick," "the pain is excruciating," and "each day less possible" depict trauma as an identity that the protagonist possesses rather than as an actual event or thing. Therefore, Figure 1 shows that trauma is mainly encoded through Mental processes (internal experience) and Relational processes (states of being), whereas silence is grammatically constructed through two main patterns: the systematic avoidance of Verbal processes (speech) and Existential processes (assertion of existence). This distribution offers the fundamental response to the research goal: silence in *A Little Life* is grammatically rooted in the very choice of which process types emerge and which are consistently avoided, rather than just being what is left unsaid at the content level.

CONCLUSION

Using Hanya Yanagihara's *a Little Life* as a case study, this study examined how Systemic Functional Linguistics transitivity patterns induce trauma narrative silence and omission. In 149 clauses, mental processes prevail at 35%, sener omission at 23%, and phenomenon omission at 15%, encoding dissociation. Thirty percent are material processes, with thirty-three percent being actor omission and twenty-two percent being passive voice,

which encodes passivity and lack of agency. Just 8% of verbal processes happen, and 50% of omissions are non-disclosure and empty speech. Relational processes (19%) and carrier omission (14%), encode incomplete identification. Omission accounts for 50% of existential processes, which are practically nonexistent at 1% and avoid asserting existence. Three theoretical contributions are made: a replicable three-stage framework for analyzing silence across trauma narratives; a bridge between trauma studies and linguistics by providing grammatical correlates for dissociation and passivity; and an extension of SFL transitivity to analyze omission as meaningful grammatical choice. Literary criticism, therapeutic and forensic investigation of trauma testimony, and computational identification of linguistic omission patterns are all practically informed by this method. When viewed collectively, these results show that silence in trauma narratives is an organized and functionally relevant linguistic strategy that determines how painful experience is portrayed rather than just a lack of language. Trauma is formed through systematic gaps in agency, perception, and existence, implying that what is left out can be as essential as what is expressed. To evaluate the wider applicability of these patterns, future research should look at greater and more diversified corpora, including non-literary data like clinical interviews and autobiographical narratives, given the study's concentrate on a single literary text. To improve and widen the knowledge of omission in diverse scenarios, future study may use more SFL metafunctions or computational tools.

There are a number of limitations to this study. The conclusions may not apply to different genres, cultural conditions, or languages because the study is reliant on a particular literary narrative. In order to uncover exclusion patterns that are culturally specific, future research should apply the notion to bigger corpora, such as non-Western trauma narratives. Furthermore, the study only looked at the ideational metafunction (transitivity); future studies should look at textual metafunctions like theme and periodicity as well as interpersonal resources like modality and appraisal. Future research could use computer tools for large-scale corpus analysis or multiple coders for inter-rater reliability. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, this study shows that omissions and silence in trauma narratives are systematic grammatical decisions made through particular transitivity

patterns across all process types, laying the groundwork for future research at the nexus of literary linguistics, SFL, and trauma studies.

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