A SYNTACTIC STUDY OF TRAUMA REPRESENTATION IN PAUL TRAN'S ALL THE FLOWERS KNEELING AND CATHY LINH CHE'S SPLIT

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Key words:	Abstract:
trauma poetry, syntactic analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics, transitivity, diasporic marginality	*This study conducts a syntactic analysis of trauma representation in Paul Tran's All the Flowers Kneeling (2022) and Cathy Linh Che's Split (2014), using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as its theoretical framework. Focusing on transitivity, passive constructions, agent suppression, and clause compression, the research explores how poetic syntax encodes experiences of sexual violence, intergenerational trauma, and diasporic marginality. Findings reveal that both poets employ grammar not merely as stylistic embellishment but as a deliberate expressive tool: Tran's syntactic shift from passive to mental and verbal processes mirrors a reclamation of agency, while Che's fragmentary, agentless constructions embody emotional stasis and cultural silencing. Through SFL, the study uncovers how grammatical choices reflect the psychological logic of trauma—foregrounding the body over the actor, the aftermath over the event, and silence over exposition. The analysis affirms that syntactic form in trauma poetry functions as a narrative of survival, memory, and resistance. By positioning grammar as a site of affective and political meaning, this study contributes to trauma stylistics, intersectional poetics, and the evolving application of linguistic theory in literary criticism.*

Introduction

Poetry has increasingly emerged as a medium through which survivors of trauma negotiate the unspeakable—particularly in contexts shaped by gender-based violence, war memory, and diasporic identity. Among contemporary poets, Paul Tran and Cathy Linh Che stand out for their powerful engagements with such histories in *All

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

the Flowers Kneeling and *Split*, respectively. In these collections, trauma is not only thematically present but formally encoded at the syntactic level. Through passive constructions, agent suppression, and shifts between transitive and intransitive verbs, both poets manipulate grammar to reflect states of disempowerment, resistance, and the gradual reclamation of agency. This study undertakes a syntactic analysis of these works, guided by systemic functional linguistics and theories of transitivity, to explore how syntax functions as a mode of psychological and political expression.

The structure of traumatic memory often resists linear narration and stable voice. Scholars argue that trauma disrupts not only the content of language but its very form, manifesting in fractured syntax, passive voice, and grammatical opacity (Whitehead 17). In poetry, these effects are amplified, as language is pared down and intensified. Recent stylistic research affirms that choices in transitivity—how participants and actions are structured in a clause—can reveal a speaker's emotional stance, particularly in narratives of suffering and recovery (Burke and Freeman 113). When the subject of a clause is acted upon, or when the agent is entirely suppressed, the syntax mirrors the erasure and silencing central to traumatic experience.

Paul Tran's *All the Flowers Kneeling* explores gendered violence and intergenerational trauma through syntax that foregrounds vulnerability.

Many poems rely on passive voice—"I was held," "the body was broken"—thereby deflecting focus from the perpetrator and centering the body as a site of harm. These syntactic structures align with trauma stylistics findings, where grammatical passivity often signals psychological distancing or repression (Crossley et al. 49). Cathy Linh Che's *Split*, by contrast, often eliminates verbs altogether or fragments the clause structure to evoke the silence that surrounds familial and wartime trauma. In both cases, syntax becomes an extension of emotional and historical dislocation.

Despite extensive work in trauma literature, there remains a critical gap at the intersection of trauma, syntax, and poetry. While much trauma criticism attends to narrative and memory, fewer studies analyze the grammatical mechanics that carry emotional force. Talbot and Richardson highlight how agentless constructions—what they term "syntactic erasure"—reflect a politics of silence and gendered vulnerability (223). This study responds to that call by analyzing how Tran and Che manipulate clause structure to enact, not merely describe, trauma.

The study draws on Halliday's framework of transitivity, which identifies how grammatical roles such as actor, goal, and experiencer are distributed within a clause (Halliday and Matthiessen 145). Additionally, Hopper and Thompson's semantic parameters help assess verb valency and clause dynamism, key tools for

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

measuring how trauma affects linguistic agency. In pairing these grammatical models with close literary reading, the study advances a stylistic approach to trauma that is both empirically grounded and interpretively rich.

This inquiry is significant for several reasons. First, it expands trauma studies by integrating syntactic analysis, offering a granular account of how grammar encodes psychological rupture. Second, it centers queer and diasporic Vietnamese voices, highlighting the interplay between form, identity, and memory. Finally, it contributes to the emerging field of trauma stylistics by showing how language at the level of the clause stages the dynamics of victimhood and survival. Syntax, in these poems, is not incidental; it is a battlefield where trauma is both concealed and contested.

Research Questions

1. How do syntactic structures such as passive voice, ergativity, and transitivity encode experiences of agency and victimhood in *All the Flowers Kneeling* and *Split*?

2. What role does agent suppression or grammatical minimalism play in reflecting psychological trauma within these collections?

3. In what ways do syntactic shifts signal movement from disempowerment to agency across the narrative arc of each text?

Literature Review

Recent developments in trauma theory and stylistic analysis have led to an interdisciplinary rethinking of how literature registers and reconstitutes experiences of violence, erasure, and survival. Traditionally, trauma studies in literature emphasized narrative rupture, silence, and memory distortion—concerns rooted in the psychoanalytic traditions of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. However, recent scholars such as Anne Whitehead and Mary Talbot have turned attention to the linguistic and syntactic dimensions of trauma representation, arguing that trauma manifests not only in content or plot but at the grammatical and discursive level of the text (Whitehead 17; Talbot and Richardson 223). Whitehead's *Trauma and Literature: The Linguistic Turn* marks a pivotal shift in trauma studies by emphasizing language as a structuring force rather than a transparent medium. She asserts that trauma "disturbs language at the level of syntax and temporality," producing effects such as passive voice, stunted clause development, and syntactic fragmentation (Whitehead 19). These disruptions, often seen in poetry, are not stylistic flourishes but indicators of psychic dislocation. This insight has encouraged scholars to examine trauma writing with closer attention to grammatical form.

In parallel, Burke and Freeman argue that stylistic choices—particularly in syntactic organization—are capable of encoding subtle emotional cues such as hesitation, fear, and detachment (113). This perspective supports the study's central hypothesis: that shifts in clause

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

structure, agency, and voice are deliberate mechanisms poets use to articulate and contain trauma.

One of the most productive tools for analyzing syntactic representation of trauma is transitivity, derived from Halliday's *Systemic Functional Grammar*. Transitivity analysis considers "who does what to whom" in a clause, enabling the study of how grammatical roles (actor, goal, experiencer) reflect power dynamics and emotional positioning (Halliday and Matthiessen 145). A transitive clause such as "He hurt me" foregrounds an agent and a victim, whereas its passive counterpart "I was hurt" obscures or erases the agent—potentially aligning with the speaker's need for emotional distancing.

This has been further refined by Hopper and Thompson, who developed a gradient model of transitivity, arguing that clauses vary in their "agency load" depending on verb type, participant structure, and aspect (64). Their model has been employed in recent trauma stylistics to measure how authors modulate the intensity and opacity of emotional content by manipulating clause valency and ergativity (Crossley et al. 49). The presence or absence of agents, shifts from action to experience verbs, and transformations of voice can thus become meaningful indicators of psychological orientation toward trauma.

Feminist linguists and trauma theorists alike have also explored the relationship between syntactic minimalism and the silencing of female or queer voices. Talbot and Richardson identify "syntactic erasure" as a phenomenon where grammatical agents are removed, and the resulting structures foreground passivity, affect, or stasis—especially in narratives of gendered violence (226). In poetry, this erasure often takes the form of verbless fragments, passive voice, or intransitive verbs, drawing attention to the victim's isolation or voicelessness.

In *Split*, Che frequently employs these devices, reflecting a speaker constrained by familial silence and intergenerational trauma. Similarly, Tran's *all the Flowers Kneeling* oscillates between passive structures and reflexive voice to perform the unstable positioning of a queer, diasporic survivor. These poetic strategies align with Richardson's view that "syntactic manipulation becomes a site of political resistance and testimonial ambiguity" (Richardson 218). The present study builds on this foundation, investigating how syntax enacts both subjection and reclamation of self.

While trauma stylistics has gained traction in prose and autobiography studies, its application to contemporary poetry is still emerging. Recent work by Crossley et al. uses computational linguistic tools to analyze trauma survivors' writing, noting that "low-agency syntax and agentless clauses correlate with unresolved

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi
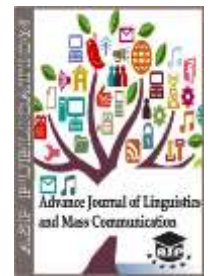
trauma narratives" (50). Although their study focuses on narrative prose, their findings are directly applicable to trauma poetry, where syntactic economy is more intense and symbolic. Paul Tran's work exemplifies this symbolic encoding. Poems such as "Copal" and "Testimony" alternate between grammatical suppression and assertion, staging a journey from voicelessness to confrontation. In Cathy Linh Che's "Triptych" and "To Speak," grammar becomes a site of struggle, where speech is both yearned for and resisted. These patterns support Freeman's assertion that poetic syntax is "emotionally charged territory," particularly in trauma-centered collections (Freeman 106).

By combining linguistic theory with poetic analysis, this study contributes to the growing field of trauma stylistics and offers a comparative insight into how contemporary Vietnamese American poets encode victimhood and recovery in their grammatical choices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a theory of language developed by M. A. K. Halliday that conceives of language as a social semiotic system—a resource for making meaning rather than merely a set of formal grammatical rules. Halliday's model is particularly apt for the analysis of trauma poetry because it links linguistic form with experiential meaning, offering a powerful tool for understanding how survivors encode, suppress,

or reclaim agency through syntactic structure. Unlike generative or structural approaches that treat syntax as abstract and autonomous, SFL situates grammatical choice within a broader context of what language *does* in the world, how it functions to enact relationships, represent experience, and organize discourse. These orientations are essential to this study's objective: to examine how trauma—particularly in the context of sexual violence, silence, and diasporic marginality—is structured into the grammar of poetic texts by Paul Tran and Cathy Linh Che.

At the heart of SFL is Halliday's concept of metafunctions, which posits that every clause in language performs three simultaneous functions: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual (Halliday and Matthiessen 83). Of these, the ideational metafunction—which concerns how language represents processes, participants, and circumstances in the world—is most central to this study. Through the ideational metafunction, Halliday introduces the transitivity system, a grammatical system that accounts for how actions and events are constructed and how agency is assigned or removed in a clause. This system allows for the categorization of processes (such as doing, thinking, feeling, being), participants (such as actor, goal, experiencer), and the circumstances that surround these processes. In trauma poetry, these elements are often manipulated to reflect

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

emotional positioning: trauma survivors may grammatically suppress agents, foreground affected participants, or switch from material to mental processes as a way of distancing, reframing, or internalizing traumatic experience. The utility of transitivity analysis in literary stylistics lies in its sensitivity to how who does what to whom is realized syntactically. For instance, the clause "He hurt me" constructs a clear actor-goal dynamic, assigning blame and emphasizing victimhood. However, when rephrased as "I was hurt," the agent is grammatically backgrounded or deleted, and the focus shifts to the experiencer of the action rather than the doer. In *All the Flowers Kneeling*, Tran frequently uses such passive constructions—"the body was broken," "I was held"—which highlight the speaker's disempowerment during moments of violation. The choice of passivization here is not neutral but a strategic linguistic response to trauma, functioning simultaneously as a shield against exposure and a means of centering suffering. Halliday emphasizes that the passive voice is not simply a stylistic variant of the active but a fundamental reconfiguration of experiential meaning (Halliday and Matthiessen 143). In trauma contexts, this reconfiguration often mirrors the survivor's fragmented relationship to memory, control, and voice.

Similarly, Cathy Linh Che's *Split* draws heavily on SFL-relevant structures to express the silences that haunt intergenerational trauma. Many of her poems exhibit syntactic minimalism—short, verbless clauses, agentless constructions, and interrupted sequences—which result in a textual atmosphere of fragmentation and suppression. These grammatical decisions reflect what Halliday would call the reduced agency of the subject, whereby the clause serves to express affect and embodiment more than action. In some cases, the poet eliminates verbs altogether, replacing transitivity with imagery or sensory recall, thus shifting the burden of meaning onto the reader's interpretive work. This aligns with Halliday's notion that grammatical metaphor—where meaning is displaced from expected syntactic structures—can be used to encode complex experiential realities (Halliday and Matthiessen 654). In trauma poetry, this metaphorization of grammar is often a response to what cannot be spoken directly.

Another key contribution of SFL is its emphasis on choice. In Hallidayan theory, speakers or writers constantly make grammatical choices based on their communicative needs and social positioning. In this way, the theory allows analysts to interpret linguistic forms not as accidents or unconscious habits but as motivated selections from a repertoire of available options. This is especially useful in analyzing trauma poetry, where silence, vagueness, and ambiguity are not deficiencies but deliberate forms of

testimony. The absence of an agent in a clause, for example, is not necessarily a failure to name the perpetrator but may be a linguistic manifestation of dissociation, fear, or resistance to closure. By using SFL to read these silences syntactically, the critic can attend to the emotional weight of grammatical choices and the ethics of representation embedded within them. Moreover, SFL's emphasis on language as functional and situated supports this study's broader concern with how race, gender, and diaspora intersect with grammar. Both Tran and Che are Vietnamese American poets writing within queer and postcolonial frameworks, and their syntactic choices are inflected by these positionalities. Halliday's model allows for this intersectional reading by recognizing that language is shaped by the social roles and histories of its users. Grammar, in this view, is not just a vehicle of individual expression but a negotiated site of identity, trauma, and resistance. As such, SFL offers both a linguistic and ideological framework for interpreting the structural dimensions of trauma in these poetic texts.

In conclusion, Systemic Functional Linguistics provides a rigorous and ethically attuned model for analyzing the relationship between syntax and trauma in poetry. Its attention to transitivity, agency, and experiential meaning makes it especially suited to the study of works like *All the Flowers Kneeling* and *Split*, where trauma is not only told but enacted through grammar. By reading syntactic choices as acts of meaning-making, this study foregrounds how poetry becomes a space where survivors reconstruct their relationship to language, self, and memory—one clause at a time.

Analysis and Findings

This section presents a syntactic analysis of selected poems from Paul Tran's *All the Flowers Kneeling* and Cathy Linh Che's *Split*, guided by Halliday's transitivity model. Through close reading at the clause level, the analysis reveals that both poets systematically manipulate voice, process types, and agency structures to reflect psychological states of trauma, silence, and recovery. Though their styles differ—Tran's more formally sculpted, Che's more fragmentary—both poets encode victimhood and survival in syntactic configurations that foreground the experiencer over the actor, or the body over the event, in accordance with the tenets of Systemic Functional Linguistics.

1. Passive Constructions and the Erasure of the Perpetrator

Passive voice appears as one of the most consistent grammatical strategies for expressing trauma in both collections. In Hallidayan terms, the passive clause serves to foreground the goal (the affected participant) while backgrounding or deleting the actor entirely (Halliday and Matthiessen 143). In Tran's poem "Testimony," the line "I was held down by many hands"

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

highlights the speaker's vulnerability by placing them in the grammatical subject position while rendering the agents as an indistinct, collective force. In some variants, as in "The body was broken," the agent disappears completely, suggesting either a narrative of unaccountability or a speaker psychologically unwilling or unable to name the perpetrator.

These patterns align with trauma linguistics scholarship, which associates the use of passivization with dissociative strategies in survivor testimony (Whitehead 19). In SFL, this shift from "they broke my body" to "the body was broken" does not just mark a stylistic preference; it reconstructs the power dynamic of the clause, granting visibility to the survivor's body and experience, while simultaneously displacing or anonymizing the source of harm. By grammaticalizing the aftermath rather than the event, Tran's poetry embodies the temporal displacement typical of trauma memory.

Che's *Split* similarly relies on passive and agentless constructions to represent gendered and familial trauma. In "Triptych," the speaker writes, "The room was quiet. My body stiff." The syntactic minimalism—omission of agents, verbless constructions—creates an atmosphere of silence and psychic stasis. Here, trauma is not only encoded in what is said but in how little is said and how it is grammatically shaped. According to Halliday, such omissions serve to reduce clause complexity and shift experiential focus, resulting in what he terms grammatical metaphor—where the clause becomes a compacted carrier of emotional meaning (Halliday and Matthiessen 654).

2. Material vs. Mental Processes: Transition from Disempowerment to Reflection

Both Tran and Che strategically shift between material processes (actions involving physical agency) and mental processes (cognition, perception, and emotion), as categorized in SFL. In Tran's "Copal," early stanzas are dominated by material clauses such as "They pushed me," "I was led," and "The hands forced"—all emphasizing bodily violation and external control. As the poem progresses, these clauses give way to mental processes: "I remember nothing," "I feared," "I know this now." This grammatical shift reflects a thematic and psychological movement from being acted upon to being a subject capable of reflection.

Halliday describes mental process clauses as those where the participant is a "senser" rather than an actor (Halliday and Matthiessen 199). This shift marks a reclaiming of interiority. The move from externalized harm to internal processing through syntax mirrors the speaker's emerging narrative agency—a pattern also identified by Burke and Freeman in stylistic studies of recovery narratives (Freeman 114).

In *Split*, similar movements occur, albeit more fragmented. In "The Story of My Father,"

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

material actions ("He hit my mother") are abruptly interrupted by mental fragments ("I don't know why," "I hated") and existential phrases ("There was blood"). The instability of process types here—often fused in the same poetic line—enacts the ambivalence and confusion of trauma memory, where experience is difficult to categorize or fix grammatically. This syntactic instability reinforces the emotional volatility encoded in the poetic voice.

3. Agent Suppression and Grammatical Silence

Agent suppression—a core feature of trauma syntax—is another dominant pattern. In SFL terms, this involves leaving the actor implicit or entirely deleting it, often in passive or middle constructions. Tran's line "I was touched" contains no reference to who touched the speaker. Similarly, Che writes, "She was taken," leaving the actor unknown. These are not mere omissions; they are syntactic embodiments of the speaker's refusal, inability, or danger in naming the violator. Talbot and Richardson refer to such constructions as forms of "syntactic erasure," a strategy often observed in gendered trauma discourse (Talbot and Richardson 226).

The significance of this pattern is not only grammatical but political. In removing the agent, the poets withhold power from the perpetrator while centering the survivor's embodied experience. This aligns with Halliday's principle that grammatical choices are ideologically charged, often reflecting the speaker's stance within structures of power and memory (Halliday and Matthiessen 83).

4. Clause Compression and Emotional Containment

Another syntactic pattern observed is clause compression, particularly in Che's work, where complex sentences are frequently reduced to bare syntagms or fragments. For instance, lines such as "Closed door. Bruised skin. No sound" appear without finite verbs, suggesting a poetic grammar of containment. These compressed structures limit the semantic expansion typical of standard clauses, thereby echoing the muted emotional states associated with trauma. Halliday identifies these as instances of nominalization and reduced transitivity, where process and action are replaced by stative or descriptive elements (Halliday and Matthiessen 258).

Tran, though more elaborate in style, also engages in clause reduction at key moments of emotional climax. In "Testimony," after a sequence of active and passive clauses, the stanza collapses into: "Silence. Breathing. Still." The grammatical truncation serves as a linguistic exhale, a syntax of trauma pause that foregrounds affect over narrative progression.

Through detailed syntactic analysis, the study finds that both *All the Flowers Kneeling* and *Split* employ grammar not only to recount trauma but to re-enact its psychological and

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

emotional structures. Passive voice, agent suppression, and transitivity shifts are deployed as poetic strategies that **mirror dissociation**, **express fear**, and **stage recovery**. Halliday's SFL framework proves especially valuable in identifying how grammatical choices function as affective and ideological tools. Ultimately, the poets' use of syntax emerges as a form of resistance, testimony, and healing—where the very structure of the sentence participates in reclaiming the narrative of the self.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal how syntax—particularly through passive constructions, transitivity shifts, and agent suppression—serves as an essential expressive tool in representing trauma, not merely reflecting emotional states but actively constructing a grammar of survival and silence. Using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics as the theoretical lens, this analysis confirms that linguistic choices made by Paul Tran and Cathy Linh Che are deeply interwoven with the politics of victimhood, voice, and reclamation. The poetic clause becomes a site of negotiation, where the poet's syntactic decisions mirror the destabilized subjectivity of trauma survivors while also performing subtle acts of resistance.

In Tran's *All the Flowers kneeling*, the speaker's voice fluctuates between subjection and assertion. The early dominance of passive voice and low-agency transitivity structures—"I was held," "the body was broken"—highlights the speaker's initial vulnerability and lack of control. However, the gradual emergence of mental and verbal processes ("I remember," "I speak") suggests an increasing reclamation of narrative authority. This linguistic arc corresponds with what Halliday identifies as the shift from material processes (external, often violent action) to mental processes (internal reflection), signaling the subject's progression from physical victim to conscious agent (Halliday and Matthiessen 170). Importantly, this transformation occurs not in spite of grammar but through it.

Che's *Split* similarly reflects the psychological fragmentation caused by trauma, but with an even more austere syntactic style. Her use of verbless clauses, nominalizations, and agentless passives such as "She was taken" or "The door shut" amplifies the sense of syntactic muteness, a theme that parallels cultural silence surrounding familial violence and the Vietnam War. The compression and stasis in her lines enact the unspeakability of trauma, reinforcing what Whitehead refers to as "linguistic deferral," a delay or evasion of confrontation through grammatical choice (Whitehead 21). Che's minimalist grammar refuses resolution, choosing instead to hover in suspended states of memory, dissociation, and cultural displacement.

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi
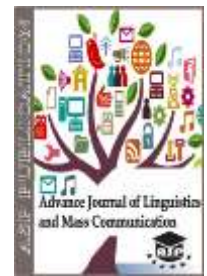
Both poets use syntactic suppression not as a deficiency but as a strategic grammar of affect. The agent, when removed, destabilizes the moral binary of victim and perpetrator, reflecting the ambiguity and complexity of trauma experiences. This syntactic ambiguity resonates with Talbot and Richardson's observation that agent deletion in trauma narratives often reflects social pressure, stigma, or fear rather than mere forgetfulness (Talbot and Richardson 226). In this light, grammatical choices become ethical decisions—how much to reveal, to whom, and through what form.

Another important implication of this study lies in the intersectional significance of syntax. Both Tran and Che are writing from queer and diasporic Vietnamese American subject positions. Their syntactic decisions must be read not only through the lens of trauma but through the pressures of cultural erasure, colonial legacies, and gendered silencing. The erasure of agents and the centering of broken bodies also metaphorically reflects the political history of Asian American invisibility in American literary discourse. As Halliday insists, language reflects the social history and position of its speaker (Halliday and Matthiessen 33). Thus, when Tran writes "I was renamed" or Che writes "She disappeared," the grammar encodes both individual and collective trauma, embedded in cultural histories of exile and gendered violence.

Systemic Functional Linguistics proves especially productive in making these insights visible. Its insistence that language is a system of choices made in context allows scholars to trace the emotional and political contours of poetic speech at the micro-level of the clause. In trauma poetry, where much of the suffering occurs below the threshold of explicit narration, syntax becomes the primary vehicle of resistance, testimony, and survival.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and broader implications of this syntactic study of trauma poetry, several recommendations are offered for literary scholars, educators, and future researchers:

1. Integrate SFL into Literary Pedagogy

There is strong potential in applying Halliday's SFL to the teaching of poetry, particularly texts that deal with trauma, gender, and diasporic identity. Educators should incorporate transitivity analysis and grammatical inquiry into close reading practices, especially at senior secondary and university levels. Doing so will help students perceive how language form shapes emotional meaning, rather than treating grammar and literature as separate domains.

2. Expand Trauma Stylistics to Marginalized Voices

Future research should extend trauma stylistics to underrepresented authors, especially those writing from queer, postcolonial, or immigrant perspectives. The syntactic erasure and agency

Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

suppression observed in Tran and Che's work are likely mirrored in other trauma narratives by writers outside the mainstream canon. SFL offers a replicable framework for revealing the linguistic consequences of silencing, displacement, and recovery across a wider range of voices.

3. Adopt Interdisciplinary Methodologies

The field of trauma studies would benefit from more cross-pollination between literary criticism, linguistics, and psychology. Collaborations across these fields can deepen understanding of how language encodes dissociation, repression, and emotional processing. Future studies might pair SFL analysis with neurocognitive or clinical frameworks, especially in examining therapeutic writing and survivor testimony.

4. Prioritize Grammar as a Site of Political Meaning

Researchers and critics should resist dismissing syntactic analysis as formalist or apolitical. As this study shows, grammar is a politically charged medium in trauma discourse. Passivization, agency removal, and clause compression are not neutral; they reflect and reproduce structures of power, memory, and silence. Poetic language, far from being ornamental, becomes a battleground for control, dignity, and truth.

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Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi
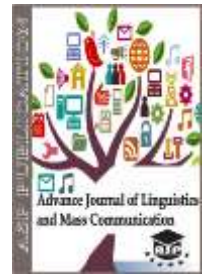
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Chijioke Edward (Ph. D), Ugwu Sabina Ogechukwu and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi