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Representing Conflict Through Transitivity: A Comparative SFL Analysis of USCENTCOM and Iranian MFA Official Statements During the US-Iran Conflict

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Abstract: This study compares statements made during the U.S.-Iran conflict from April to June 2026 from the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) using SFL. It looks at the transitivity patterns that are used to signal military actions, social actors, agency, responsibility, legitimacy, and Self/Other relations in conflicting institutional discourses. The analysis is based on Halliday and Matthiessen's Transitivity System, where the process types, participant roles and circumstances are taken into consideration. The corpus consists of 24 official documents, 12 being public releases from USCENTCOM, and 12 being statements released by the Iranian MFA, which results in 354 coded clauses. The results show that the material processes make up the bulk of the combined corpus with 200 clauses. USCENTCOM has 95 material processes with 127 clauses, with a focus on operational action, military capability, protection, threat interception, and defense response. The Iranian MFA includes 105 material processes in 227 clauses, relational processes in 59 clauses and the verbal processes in 55 clauses. These patterns suggest a wider legal/ diplomatic context in Iranian MFA discourse, with verbal processes denouncing and asserting diplomatic powers, and relational processes categorizing U.S. behaviors and/or their consequences by aggression, violation, sovereignty, and responsibility. Both institutions are responsible for building positive Self-presentation and negative Other-presentation in the way they act on the role of participants and their patterns of agency. The primary purpose of USCENTCOM is to advocate for the U.S. forces as active and defensive, with the Iranian MFA claiming Iran is a sovereign, defensive actor and the U.S. is the perpetrator of aggression and lawlessness. The study shows that official conflict discourse does not just represent events, but grammatically creates divergent narratives of legitimacy, agency, blame, and responsibility.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics; Transitivity; USCENTCOM; Iranian MFA; Conflict Discourse

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

The present study is based on the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory, which considers language as a social semiotic system in which grammatical choices give rise to meanings in specific situations, and focuses on the Transitivity System of official English language statements issued by USCENTCOM and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs between April and June 2026, mainly in the context of agency and responsibility and conflict representation.

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The research problem is the lack of comparative study of official military and diplomatic messages on the same time period of the same conflict. While the two agencies communicate about the same events, there are different linguistic situations for representing actors and actions because of the institutional requirements and communicative functions of each agency. Much of the research on transitivity has been focused on the political speech, news print, editorial or institutional text, and the number of studies focused on a comparison of the official military and diplomatic statements of opposing institutions in the same conflict is limited. The current study fills this research deficit by comparing the grammatical structures used by USCENTCOM and the Iranian MFA to depict action, agency, responsibility and relation between Self/Other.

The study examines the similarities and differences between the transitivity patterns of official USCENTCOM releases and statements made by Iranian MFA on the U.S.-Iran conflict between April and June 2026. It investigates the nature of processes, role of participants, agency, responsibility and the linguistic construction of Self and Other with three research questions.

RQ1: What types of transitivity processes are used in the texts of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in the U.S.-Iran conflict?

RQ2: What language features realizes participant roles to the representation of the Self and the Other in the two institutional corpora?

RQ3: In what ways do the transitivity choices of the USCENTCOM and Iranian MFA regarding military action and social agents, as well as responsibility, differ?

The study is a contribution to Systemic Functional Linguistics as it uses Halliday's Transitivity System to examine official military and diplomatic discourse of the same international conflict. The usefulness of the transitivity analysis approach has been shown for political speeches, news discourse and literature related to war; however, comparatively little has been written about paired statements directly emanating from military and diplomatic authorities. The study thus continues the tradition of the transitivity analysis in the context in which grammatical options are directly involved in institutional constructions of conflict, legitimacy, and responsibility.

Additionally, from a practical point of view the analysis has implications for discourse analysts and researchers who study official discourse. It shows how these different dimensions of process, i.e. not only who participates and how they are involved, but also agency patterns and situations, help to produce different institutional interpretations of the same geopolitical events. The study is not the assessment of the fact of the political statement made by the institutions. Rather, it describes the linguistic patterning and the way these claims are represented, namely in the grammar.

The study covers only documents released during the period April-June 2026 by USCENTCOM and the Iranian MFA in English. Internal communications, non-English texts, editorials, news reports, non-verbal statements by others are not included. The analysis focuses solely on Halliday and Matthiessen's Transitivity System and does not consider appraisal or mood, or modality. These boundaries help determine the language and corpus boundaries of the study.

2. Literature Review

The literature review consists of theoretical and empirical studies for comparative SFL analysis of two discourses of USCENTCOM and Iranian MFA, which covers the literature on ideational meanings, in particular process types, participants, circumstances, agency and responsibility.^{1,2} It also covers the literature regarding transitivity in political discourse, in media

discourse, in war discourse, in official discourse, and the absence of comparative studies on opposing institutional press releases.^{3,4}

Systemic Functional Linguistics views language as a social semiotic system through which speakers and institutions construct meaning in context.^{1,5} Grammar is therefore treated as a network of choices that serves communicative functions rather than as a fixed set of formal rules.^{2,3} Halliday identifies ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, with the ideational meta function concerned with the representation of experience, participants, and circumstances. The present study is centered around this meta function because it is on this that the examination of the grammatical representation of conflict-related events and social actors in this study is based.

The system of transitivity, which Halliday calls the Transitivity System, is more complex than the traditional grammar of transitivity and differentiates between material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral and existential processes in terms of the experience that is being described.^{3,5} The roles of participants depend on the type of process; circumstances offer clues to time, place, manner, cause, purpose and other contextual dimensions.

Material processes are actions and events, and are therefore important in war and military talk. Sensing processes are used to identify mental processes such as perceiving, seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling; cognition processes describe mental processes such as understanding, learning, and remembering; emotion processes describe mental processes such as feeling, resenting, and wanting; and desire processes describe mental processes such as wanting, wishing, and preferring.

Relational processes are used to classify, identify or attribute meanings, particularly in legal and diplomatic contexts. Saying, warning, condemning and declaring are verbal processes that are important for official institutional statements.⁶ Formal institutional texts are less likely to include behavioural processes, but existential processes add the process of threats, risks or responsibilities. Transitivity is used in this study to explore who is doing what, who is affected by it, and how responsibility is shared between the Self and the Other.

Material, relational, and verbal processes are therefore of particular relevance for the analysis of action, classification, authority and responsibility, which is also the focus of political and conflict discourse, as agency can either be foregrounded or backgrounded in material clauses, while the use of passive constructions, nominalizations, abstraction and omission can background responsible actors.^{5,6} The transitivity analysis has been shown to be an effective tool for establishing relationship between the choices in grammar and ideology in political, media, conflict discourse, etc., in previous research.^{7,8,9} In this study, Matu and Lubbe analyze the positive Self-presentation and negative Other-presentation in Kenyan newspaper editorials, with the help of transitivity analysis.⁷ Transitivity analysis is also used to examine newspaper headlines related to terrorism and the representation of social actors in conflict of discourse.¹⁰ Kazemian and Hashemi examine how transitivity and rhetorical strategies shape the representation of political ideas in Barack Obama's 2012 speeches.¹¹ Previous research also applies transitivity analysis to political speeches to examine the representation of political actors and actions.¹²

The literature that has been reviewed indicates that there has been a wide use of the method of transitivity analysis to analyze political speeches, presidential speeches, newspaper editorials, newspaper headlines, reporting on terrorism, and discourses legitimizing war.^{7,13,14} The present study remedies this by examining paired institutional corpora of official military releases and diplomatic statements in the same time and space, which address the same conflict period.^{15,16,17}

Studies of war and military discourse further show that grammar contributes to the legitimization of military action and the construction of in-groups and out-groups. Butt et al.¹⁸

demonstrate how grammatical roles contribute to ideological distinctions in war-related discourse, while Hampl¹⁹ examines material processes in the construction of “Us” and “Them” in the War on Terror discourse. Oddo²⁰ and Abid and Manan²¹ similarly show how official political discourse constructs identity, threat, morality, and responsibility. Achugar²² demonstrates that military discourse also participates in the construction of institutional memory and identity. These studies establish the analytical value of transitivity but primarily examine speeches, headlines, editorials, or mediated discourse rather than directly comparing official military and diplomatic statements from opposing institutions.

The reviewed literature establishes that transitivity analysis is widely used to examine political speeches, presidential addresses, newspaper editorials, headlines, terrorism reporting, and war-legitimation discourse.^{7,8,13,14} Most studies focus on mediated discourse or individual political texts rather than paired institutional corpora addressing the same conflict period.^{15,16,17} The present study addresses this limitation by comparing official military releases and diplomatic statements issued by opposing state institutions within a shared temporal and geopolitical context.

This gap is significant because official military and diplomatic texts function as institutional acts rather than merely journalistic accounts. The present comparison can therefore be used to make sense of how the same conflict is represented differently in two competing ways in institutional grammar, namely in terms of process and participant types, agency patterns and circumstantial options, and to domestic and international audiences.^{23,24}

The theoretical value of transitivity becomes clearer when process types are interpreted as interconnected grammatical resources. Material processes group events together by creating connections between actors and actions, and affected participants. Relational processes describe the classification of events and actors by categories of identity, status, legality and/or responsibility. Institutional voice has been created through verbal processes, such as presenting statements, warnings, condemnations, demands, and appeals. Additional resources for the representation of perception, conduct and States of existence can be provided by mental, behavioral and existential processes. The categories can thus be used to systematically analyze the way that conflict is produced by institutions through their grammar. The framework also allows for comparison without the assumption that the same process frequencies have the same communicative functions. Defensive action in one context can be highlighted in another context by the use of a material clause. So, it is important to consider participant roles and circumstances in order to make sense of the distributions of processes. The integrated view enables a comparison between the military and the diplomatic institutional discourse that is present at the moment.

The comparative literature also shows that the institutional genre is still one of the factors to be considered in transitivity research. Political texts appeal to audiences in a rhetorical performance and news texts to audiences in a mediated way through a selection in the journalistic fashion. The communicative position of official military releases as well as diplomatic statements is different since they are issued by institutions under formal mandate. They can link the present with institutional power, justification of policy, and public accountability in their grammatical choices. The present study builds upon the previous studies by keeping the conflict period fairly comparable in the two corpora. This design diminishes the impact of big gaps in time and focuses on institutional differences. It also enables the identification of process patterns in conjunction with roles and context of the participants in similar geopolitical situations. The comparison consequently treats genre and institutional purpose as complementary dimensions of linguistic explanation. Such an approach strengthens the interpretation of transitivity as a resource for institutional meaning-making.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts qualitative comparative discourse-analytic design with descriptive frequency count.²⁵ The primary aim of the interpretive nature of the design is not inferential but comparative, as it allows one to compare two institutionally produced corpora of texts for the same period of conflict to systematically compare the representation of actions, responsibility, agency, and Self/Other.

The 24 documents in the corpus are official in English language releases from April to June 2026 by USCENTCOM and Iranian MFA releases. USCENTCOM texts cover the rescue, minesweeping, blockade, maritime security, defensive action and Iranian attack responses. Ceasefire violations, attacks on Iranian vessels and facilities, sovereignty, international law, self-defense, and calls for action by international organizations are among the themes discussed in Iranian MFA documents. Documents are selected using purposive sampling technique, which involves the selection of documents that are directly relevant to the research questions. No news reports, editorials, social media posts, non-English documents or unrelated documents are included and repeated statements count as one.²⁶

Clauses are the unit of analysis used because they are the grammatical units through which experience is represented in Systemic Functional Linguistics.^{3,5} Prior to coding, each document is segmented into clauses. Where necessary, clauses containing multiple processes are broken up into separate clauses to enable each process to be assigned to its appropriate participant structure. In the case of “U.S. forces conducted self-defense strikes”, “conducted” is the material process, “U.S. forces” is the Actor, and “self-defense strikes” is the Goal. The verbal process in “The Ministry strongly condemns the attack” is “condemns”, the Sayer is “The Ministry” and the Verbiage is “the attack”.

The transitivity system by Halliday and Matthiessen is used in the analytical framework, which is a semantic system for the representation of actions, events, states, thoughts, speech, behavior and existence, each of which is coded for by a clause. There are six types of processes: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral and existential. The roles of participants are Actor, Goal, Sayer, Verbiage, Carrier, Attribute, Senser, Phenomenon and Existent. The coding also specifies who are the actors (Self, Other, and third-party actors and records agency, responsibility, circumstances, and discursive function).

The following coding categories were used to organize the analysis:

Table 1 Coding Categories Used in the Analysis

Type of Coding	Focus	Examples
Process type	Six process categories	Material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural, existential
Participant role	Role associated with each process	Actor, Goal, Sayer, Verbiage, Carrier, Attribute
Social actor category	Self, Other, or third-party actor	CENTCOM, Iran, UN
Agency and responsibility	Action performer and accountable actor	Action performer and accountable actor
Circumstance	Time, place, cause, manner, purpose	in Strait; in response
Discursive function	Conflict framing and evaluation	self-defense; aggression

Analysis is done in a consistent manner. The texts selected are collected into a corpus and arranged chronologically and institutionally. The analytical dataset is stripped of headings, URLs, repeated statements and is formatted in a way that is not descriptive. The texts have been broken down into clauses, and each clause coded for the main process type, roles of the participants, circumstances, category of social actors, agency, responsibility and discursive function. When USCENTCOM texts, Self will be U.S. forces, CENTCOM, American forces, allied or partner forces, and Other will be Iran and Iranian forces. In Iranian MFA texts, the term Self is used for the Islamic Republic of Iran, the MFA, Iranian armed forces and the Iranian people, while Other is used for the United States, the U.S. military, and every other entity involved in the conflict. Third party actors (or international actors) are international organizations and regional actors.

The coding procedure helps to ensure the analytical transparency, keeping the categories the same in both corpora. A primary process type is assigned to each clause, based on its grammatical and semantic role in context. Participant roles are not determined by individual lexical labels, but in terms of the process chosen. Circumstances are included when they provide some information about the time, place, manner, cause, purpose, role or matter. Social actors are then divided into the Self, the Other and the third-party actors based on their institutional positioning. This will reduce the effects of treating any individual word as a direct indicator of the ideological meaning. This also establishes a link between the clause found to be coded and the interpretation of the clause in the findings. Descriptive frequencies remain evidence rather than independent measures of ideology. Qualitative interpretation therefore remains central to the analysis, while quantitative counts provide a consistent comparative structure.

The corpus design is quite tricky as there are clauses in the two institutional corpora that vary in number. Because the frequency of each clause in the raw is not in direct proportion, it is not directly comparable between USCENTCOM and Iranian MFA. Process-type prominence is compared mainly using percentages in each of the corpora. Analysis also takes into account participant roles and circumstances as process percentages don't tell the institutional framing story.

This method avoids the effect of the larger size of the Iranian MFA corpus, as a result of the number of clauses it contains, and the appearance of a more prominent position. It also fails to make grammatical assumptions that would be aligned with an ideological intent in cases of a high rate. This comparison then highlights the language patterns that are observable and differentiates them from more general interpretations of institutional discourse. When you find these descriptions of military action, legality and responsibility in official texts, this caution is especially warranted.

The study relies on public documents that are available in the institutions and does not include human participants, interviews, private records or confidential personal information. Consent and confidentiality forms are thus not required. The ethical practice is ensured by the correct identification of sources, the accurate representation of the coded material and the distinction between the institutional claims and the researchers' interpretations. The study does not assess the political veracity of the claims of either institution, but rather the linguistic representation.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

There are 354 coded clauses in the final corpus, including 127 USCENTCOM and 227 Iranian MFA clauses. The following do not require coding: headings, dates, institutional labels, location labels, and URLs. Repeated statements are only coded the first time. The coding of passive constructions is based on the ability to identify the affected participant and the responsible Actor. The two corpora are compared using descriptive measures: frequencies and percentages. The total number of processes per corpus are shown in Appendix Table A.1.

The process distribution shows that the primary experiential resource that comes through the entire corpus is the material clause. This pattern suggests that both institutions exhibit conflict in terms of actions, events and participants. The difference is in the relative weight of other types of processes in each institutional corpus. When it comes to material processes, USCENCOM gives more emphasis to the proportional effect which emphasizes operational action and military response. In the Iranian MFA, relational and verbal processes receive more space, relative to the other elements, and thus are foregrounded, emphasizing classification and institutional speech.

This separation suggests that there is not a complete neutralization of the conflict in both institutions through action. On the contrary, every institution puts into practice in some specific grammatical resources which help its communicative function. The military corpus emphasizes the actions of the forces and the diplomatic corpus more strongly the meanings of the actions. This is why it is important that similar conflict events can take on different institutional meanings by being organized grammatically.

Participant roles provide further evidence that agency is constructed through grammatical positioning rather than lexical description alone. U.S. forces or military-type organizations are often deployed in Actor roles in material clauses within USCENCOM. These positioning allows these actors to have a visible role in action of interception, response, protection and operational control. Iranian MFA statements also give agency to institutional entities, but are more likely to include action and verbal and relational functions in conjunction with one another. Iran then can be seen as a condemning or an appealing Sayer, and as an Actor, a responding one. The United States, on the other hand, is represented in terms of action, classification, or responsibility. The patterns form contrasting patterns of Self and Other without the analysis having to establish the truth of institutional claims. The grammatical effect of agency is then interpreted as being a formulating effect, which is connected to the institutional purpose. The comparison highlights the need for interpreting the transitivity frequencies in the context of conflict discourse using the participant analysis.

Circumstantial choices help to reinforce the difference between the two institutional representations. USCENCOM conversation often puts action in operational, maritime, defense or response environments. This situation is linked to military operation and security goals and current operational requirements. The Iranian MFA discourse emphasizes events in contexts related to sovereignty and international law, ceasefire commitments, and diplomatic responsibility more often than other contexts. Such circumstances broaden the interpretive frame beyond individual military events toward legal and political consequences. The contrast is not intended to imply that of the two institutions only one type of circumstance is used. It is instead a reminder that, for each institution, there is a preference for situations that are communicative. Process and participant analysis can be supported by circumstantial analysis to provide a deeper contextual understanding. It also illustrates the manner in which the grammar of a text frames the temporal, spatial, causal and institutional circumstances of conflicting events. This result is in line with a multidimensional approach to the representation of conflict.

This study also has implications for methodological practice of Systemic Functional Linguistics. The explicit corpus boundaries of comparative institutional corpora are useful in terms of the interpretation of the linguistic patterns since the selection of the source has a direct impact on the target. The present design defines exclusion criteria, document types, language and date before interpreting coded material, while the document type, language, date and exclusion criteria are made as user recognizable as they are presented in natural language. This transparency allows later studies to extend the corpus without changing the basic analytical boundaries. The method is

also applicable to other conflicts between military commands, diplomatic ministries, international organizations or any government branches. The process categories and the participant-role framework can be reproduced and actor classifications can be adapted for new institutional contexts. This sort of replication could help determine the pattern(s) found here are conflict-specific or broader to institutional genre. The study is hence a methodological model, which relates the frequency-based comparison to the contextual approach to discourse interpretation.

4.1 Process-Type Distribution and Institutional Framing

Table 2 illustrates the relative prominence of material processes in both corpora with the processes showing in red being more prominent than those in blue. USCENTCOM has 95 material clauses out of 127 or 74.8% of its corpus. Of the 227 material clauses in the Iranian MFA, 105 (46.3%) of them are material clauses; also, 26 (4%) and 24 (2%) are relational and verbal processes, respectively. The distribution shows that, while USCENTCOM emphasizes more on action-oriented grammatical options, the Iranian MFA uses both action and legal, evaluative and diplomatic representations.

Table 2 The Distribution of Process Types Over the Whole Aggregate

Process Type	US Freq.	US %	Iran Freq.	Iran %	Overall Freq.	Overall %
Material	95	74.8%	105	46.3%	200	56.5%
Relational	19	15.0%	59	26.0%	78	22.0%
Mental	2	1.6%	7	3.1%	9	2.5%
Behavioral	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Verbal	11	8.7%	55	24.2%	66	18.6%
Existential	0	0.0%	1	0.4%	1	0.3%
Total	127	100%	227	100%	354	100%

USCENTCOM discourse is very action oriented. Its material clauses interpret military activities as completion, conducting, intercepting, enforcing, disabling, defending, protecting, striking, redirecting and eliminating. In this pattern, the U.S. forces and other military actors play a prominent role in events that unfold in the operation. Then, the prominence of material processes in the grammar allows for a representation of military capability, activity and operational control.

The Iranian MFA corpus is a combination of material and verbal and relational representation. Material processes describe attack, defence, protection, and response, while verbal processes include condemning, emphasizing, warning, recalling, calling upon, and demanding. Relational processes categorize actions by terms related to breaches of international law, aggravation, violations and threats to sovereignty. The overall pattern results in an Iranian MFA discourse, which has a more diplomatic and legal character.

4.2 Agency, Participant Roles, and Responsibility

Actor roles are particularly prevalent in USCENTCOM discourse, and often are given to U.S. forces, CENTCOM forces, U.S. Navy destroyers, American forces or partner forces. Iranian attacks, inbound threats, military sites, drones, missiles and command and control sites are covered by the corresponding Goals. This setup shines a spotlight on U.S. operational agency and often portrays Iranian actors as threats/targets. The pattern suggests a defense-oriented, protective and operational control institutional representation.

Defensive terminology further shapes the interpretation of material actions. The terms “self-defense strikes,” “protect American forces,” “defend U.S. assets” and “in response to Iranian aggression” imply that the military response is reactive, to protect security. The Strait of Hormuz

and associated marine areas are also depicted as areas of safety, navigation and commerce. The choices of grammar and circumstances help create an image of U.S. action as purposeful and legitimate in the institutional discourse.

Table 3 Material Process Analysis in USCENTCOM and Iranian MFA Corpora

No.	Corpus	Clause	Actor	Process: Material	Goal	Function
1	USCENTCOM	U.S. forces intercepted unprovoked Iranian attacks.	U.S. forces	intercepted	unprovoked Iranian attacks	U.S. forces are shown as active defenders against Iranian threat.
2	USCENTCOM	CENTCOM eliminated inbound threats.	CENTCOM	eliminated	inbound threats	CENTCOM is depicted as being able to neutralize danger.
3	Iranian MFA	The aggressors targeted schools, hospitals and sports stadiums.	The aggressors	targeted	schools, hospitals and sports stadiums	The Other is characterized as aggressive towards civilians.
4	Iranian MFA	The Islamic Republic of Iran will defend the country's territorial integrity and the security of its citizens.	The Islamic Republic of Iran	will defend	the country's territorial integrity and the security of its citizens	Iran is a defensive and sovereign Actor.

Selected material clauses are shown in the participant configurations in Table 3. The examples in USCENTCOM include the roles Actor for U.S. forces or CENTCOM, and Goal for Iranian attacks or for inbound threats. As far as Iranian MFA examples are concerned, they give examples of aggressive actions to actors which are described as aggressors, and Iran itself is represented as an actor that has to defend itself. The two corpora thus employ material processes to build up action in different ways, where USCENTCOM places emphasis on operational control and the Iranian MFA places emphasis on aggression, defense and responsibility.

There are other indications of different institutions through verbal and relational processes. Verbal processes in USCENTCOM texts set a formal tone, and provide information about operations to appropriate audiences. Relational processes describe strategic spaces, and they define military operations as they are characterized: as an international sea passage, the Strait of Hormuz and as a proportional response, an operation. These decisions help to shape the institutionalization of military activity as organized and controlled, and security oriented.

The Iranian MFA corpus reveals that verbal processes are used more often and have diplomatic functions expressed by verbs like condemns, demands, warns, recalls, reaffirms, and calls upon. Relational processes make U.S. acts “violations,” “aggression,” “breaches,” or “threats to sovereignty. The pattern places the Iranian MFA in a position to serve as an institutional Sayer and evaluator in diplomatic and legal language and writing to international audiences.

Table 4 Examples of Verbal and Relational Processes in Both Corpora

No.	Corpus	Clause	Participant 1	Role	Process	Process Type	Participant 2	Role	Function
1	USCENTCOM	“Today, we began the process of establishing a new passage,” said Adm. Brad Cooper.	Adm. Brad Cooper	Sayer	Said	Verbal	“Today, we began the process...”	Verbiage	USCENTCOM projects official military authority.
2	USCENTCOM	The Strait of Hormuz is an international sea passage.	The Strait of Hormuz	Carrier	Is	Relational	an international sea passage	Attribute	The strait is defined as a lawful international route.
3	Iranian MFA	The Ministry strongly condemns the aggressive act by the U.S. military.	The Ministry	Sayer	Condemn	Verbal	the aggressive act	Verbiage	Iran presents itself as an official condemning authority.
4	Iranian MFA	These acts constitute a clear violation of the ceasefire agreement.	These acts	Carrier/Token	Constitute	Relational	a clear violation of the ceasefire agreement	Attribute/Value	U.S. actions are classified as illegal violations.

The results in Table 4 show that the role of verbal and relational processes differ in their institutional roles. Verbal clauses are used to create an official military voice for USCENTCOM, and, in a different way, to define strategic space and to describe actions in terms of security. The Iranian MFA has two types of clauses: verbal clauses for the performance of diplomatic speech acts and relational clauses for classification of actions in legal and moral aspects. The contrast corroborates the overall result that the choices of transitivity are related to the different institutional functions of the two corpora.

Self/Other contrasting representations are also built as participants role play. The Self can be found as an Actor in material clauses in USCENTCOM, while Iran, Iranian forces, missiles, drones, and military facilities can be found as a source of threat or Goals of U.S. action in USCENTCOM. There are many examples that the Self uses the Sayer role in verbal (but not in these examples) clauses, and that the United States uses the Actor role in defensive material clauses (but not here), and that the United States, at least directly, is the Agent in the attack in the aggression or the Carrier in the responsibility clause in the relational (but not here). These patterns illustrate the role that the participation and roles of participants play in the institutionalization and the allocation of responsibility.

Table 5 Participant Roles and Self/Other Representation

No.	Corpus	Clause	Self / Other Participant	Role	Process Type	Representation
1	USCENTCOM	U.S. forces intercepted unprovoked Iranian attacks.	U.S. forces = Self	Actor	Material	The Self is represented as an active defender.
2	USCENTCOM	Iranian forces launched multiple missiles, drones, and small boats.	Iranian forces = Other	Actor	Material	The Other is represented as the source of threat.
3	Iranian MFA	The Ministry strongly condemns the military attack.	The Ministry = Self	Sayer	Verbal	The Self is represented as a diplomatic authority.
4	Iranian MFA	The United States bears full responsibility.	The United States = Other	Carrier	Relational	The Other is represented as legally responsible.

The results of the participant role patterns are provided in table 5. USCENTCOM is ‘building’ U.S. forces as active and defensive Actors, whereas Iranian forces are portrayed as a threat. In the Iranian MFA, the Ministry is a diplomatic Sayer and Iran is a defensive Actor, whereas the Other is the United States, who is held accountable. The contrast shows that the notion of Self/Other representation is not only built on the basis of grammatical participant roles, but cannot be built solely based on lexical description.

The agency becomes foregrounded when it can reinforce the preferred representation of an institutional message, and backgrounded when the responsible Actor is not a major component of the institutional message. On clauses related to protection, interception, defense and threat neutralization, USCENTCOM focuses on U.S. agency and Iranian agency is foregrounded in descriptions of missile launches and attacks. This distribution produces a recurrent contrast between U.S. defensive action and Iranian threat representation within the USCENTCOM corpus.

Passive constructions offer an alternative way of agency control. This is achieved by including clauses like “No U.S. assets were struck” that emphasize the state of U.S. assets, without mentioning the responsible Actor. These types of buildings focus on results as opposed to agency, and can therefore help an institutional representation focused on safety and controlled operation.

The Iranian MFA also makes responsibility explicit by means of relationships with constructions like “The United States bears full responsibility.” These clauses assign accountability directly rather than leaving it implicit. The corpus also covers the responsibilities assigned to the regional states and to international organizations, thus making the discourse go beyond a bilateral conflict and expanding it to an international legal and diplomatic framework.

Table 6 Agency, Passivation, Responsibility

No.	Corpus	Clause	Agency Pattern	Process	Affected Participant / Goal	Function
1	USCENTCOM	U.S. forces intercepted unprovoked Iranian attacks.	Actor explicit	intercepted	unprovoked Iranian attacks	U.S. agency is foregrounded positively.
2	USCENTCOM	No U.S. assets were struck.	Actor omitted / passive	were struck	No U.S. assets	The safety of U.S. assets is foregrounded.
3	Iranian MFA	The terrorist U.S. military has committed a grave violation of the ceasefire.	Actor explicit	has committed	a grave violation	U.S. agency is foregrounded negatively.
4	Iranian MFA	The United States bears full responsibility.	Responsibility explicit	bears	full responsibility	Blame is directly assigned to the U.S.

Table 6 shows that agency and responsibility are managed differently across the two corpora. USCENTCOM foregrounds the U.S. agent/agency in constructions that imply defensiveness or protection, and backgrounds it in selected passive constructions. The Iranian MFA places a high emphasis on the role of the U.S. Agency in the case of violations and is explicit about holding U.S. agencies accountable by means of relational clauses. The contrast supports the interpretation that both institutions organize agency strategically, although they do so for different institutional purposes.

4.3 Circumstantial Framing and Comparative Interpretation

Institutional context of conflict is reinforced by the circumstantial elements. In response to Iranian aggression, to protect American forces, with precision and professionalism, under the direction of the Commander in Chief, the US forces are reacting, etc. are a common feature in USCENTCOM texts and are often used to indicate circumstances of cause, purpose, manner and authority. The conflict is surrounded by maritime areas like the Strait of Hormuz, Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and international waters, which make the issue a security, navigation and trade issue. Iranian MFA texts, on the other hand, are more focused on the legal and institutional context, such as the UN, the ceasefire and Article 51, Article 2(4). These are choices that represent a sovereign, international law and accountability perspective of the conflict.

Comparative pattern is thus a similarity-institutional difference. Transitivity is employed in both corpora to build an ‘Other’ which is problematic and a ‘Self’ which is legitimate, but in different ways in the two corpora. In addition to the emphasis on operational action, defense, maritime security, and threat management, USCENTCOM stresses the issue of diplomacy, sovereignty, legal classification and responsibility in the Iranian MFA. The findings suggest that there are links between the communicative functions of the institutions that create the texts and the choices of transitivity.

The results show that there is a greater proportion of material processes in the combined corpus (200/354 clauses) than the institutions. While USCENTCOM’s material process is very important for operational action and defensive capability, the Iranian MFA incorporates material, verbal, and relational processes to construct representations of diplomatic, legal, and accountability. These differences are accentuated by the roles and situation of the participants, as they situate the Self and Other in institutionally preferred configurations.

5. Discussion

The results highlight the centrality of the transitivity choices in the building of competing institutional representations of the U.S.-Iran conflict. The material processes dominate the discourse of the 354-clause corpus, which suggests that the discourse of conflict is well structured around action, reaction, protection, attack, and operational events. Process frequency, however, does not necessarily influence institutional positioning as it is the lexical framing and participant roles that can influence the meaning of each process type.

Material processes are the most significant processes for USCENTCOM, with 95 occurrences out of 127 clauses. This pattern builds U.S. forces around the Active Actor role and their activity in the operational arena, threat interception, protection, and maritime security. Iranian goals, military sites, vessels, missiles and forces are often seen as Goals or threatening entities. This grammatical structure highlights U.S. agency and suggests a defensive, controlled and responsive military action. These patterns can be used to illustrate the U.S. institutional Self as a protector reacting to an external threat.

There are 105 material processes in 227 clauses in the Iranian MFA corpus with relational and verbal processes also having a strong position. The higher prevalence of these processes is due to the diplomatic and legal tenor of the corpus. With verbal processes, the Ministry is cast in the role of an authoritative Sayer who condemns, warns, emphasizes, recalls and demands. Relational processes categorize U.S. actions by terms of aggression and illegality, sovereignty and international responsibility. The Iranian MFA thus shapes conflict both in terms of its description of events, and in terms of its institutional appraisal and legal classification.

The agency and responsibility are also constructed in a different way in the role of participants. USCENTCOM’s language and actions are largely aimed at portraying the U.S. forces as active and defensive Actors, and Iran as a threat and aggressor. The Iranian MFA, on the other hand, is responsible for portraying Iran as a sovereign, defensive “Self” and the U.S. as an “aggressor” and a “responsible Other.” The two different participant constructions in the conflict discourse illustrate the role of transitivity in representing Self/Other.

Circumstantial selection helps consolidate these orientations of the institutions. USCENTCOM’s approach to events often encompasses operational, geographical, temporal and security context with respect to maritime activity and military response. The Iranian MFA puts more focus on legal and institutional aspects of the issue of sovereignty, international law, ceasefire obligations and international organizations. The decisions made in these choices create ‘frames’ that give institutional acts specific significance.

The comparison also demonstrates that similar grammatical processes can perform different institutional functions. Operational control and defensive response, and security are the main representations supported by material processes in USCENTCOM. Material, verbal, and relational processes are more effective in representing condemnation, legal responsibility, sovereignty and accountability in the Iranian MFA corpus. The results thus do not argue for a quantitative analysis of transitivity patterns as evidence of ideological positioning, but for a qualitative one.

The distinction between the institutional representation and empirical verification is kept in the analysis. Expressions relating to aggression, illegality, self-defense, proportionality or responsibility are claims that are generated by the source institutions. The claims in the study are not substantiated by the study itself. This separation helps to maintain an analytical neutrality because it focuses on institutional meanings as formed through language, instead of resolving alternative political discourses.

The results are very directly related to the three research questions. RQ1 is approached by examining the distribution of the six process types, with material processes being the most prevalent ones in both corpora, and relational and verbal processes in the Iranian MFA corpus. Participant role/agency patterns are used to address RQ2 as the creation of contrasting representations of Self and Other. This legal, diplomatic, sovereignty-oriented, and responsible focus is contrasted with USCENTCOM's operational and maritime-security focus to address RQ3.

The study also has several limitations. The corpus includes only English-language documents, which prevents comparison with the institutions' original-language discourse. The April–June 2026 period provides a bounded snapshot rather than a longitudinal representation of institutional discourse. The analysis is also limited in scope to the analysis of transitivity and does not systematically analyze modality, appraisal, mood, lexical cohesion and intertextuality.

6. Conclusion

This study proves that the Transitivity System is an efficient tool for analyzing the process, in which the official military and diplomatic discourse build conflicting representations of conflict. It is found that grammatical choices are not only descriptive of events, but also involve the organization of agency, responsibility, legitimacy, institutional identity and Self/Other relations. The results of the comparative study show the institutional orientations. USCENTCOM's core functions of building conflict consist of operational action, military readiness, protection, threat interception and maritime security. The Iranian MFA focuses more on diplomacy, legal status and sovereignty, condemnation and international responsibility. The differences are a result of the different institutional functions of a military command and a diplomatic authority.

The study has implications for the study of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and shows how the types of processes, roles of the participants, agency, and circumstances play together in the conflicting institutional views of the same conflict period. It is also a continuation of the research into political and conflict discourse because it does not only focus on a single type of discourse (whether political or military) but also uses a common transitivity framework to evaluate military and diplomatic texts.

The analysis does not assign the conflict to a particular institutional account, but rather seeks to explain the conflict's actuality. The study therefore shows that institutional conflict discourse functions not only as a means of communicating events but also as a linguistic resource for positioning actors and legitimizing institutional perspectives.

The findings offer a replicable comparative framework for future research on institutional conflict discourse. The use of expanded corpora, OLM and other SFL systems can allow for a

more comprehensive description of how competing discourses are built by institutions in different political and communicative situations.

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