

‘Our Family Is Forever Broken’: A Discourse Study on Victim Impact Statements from George Floyd’s Case

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Abstract

Victim Impact Statements (VIS) facilitate victims’ participation in the judicial process by enabling them to speak out the harm they have sustained. It also serves as a form of testimony for judges and jurors in making legal decisions. Employing discourse information theory and transitivity system, this paper aims to examine how VIS fulfill their dual objectives as a means to relieve grief for the victim’s families and serving as verbal testimony in court. To this end, this paper analyzes how ideational meanings are realized through linguistic choices and information structures in three VIS from George Floyd’s case, and further explores their perceived impact through an analysis of audience responses. Findings reveal that the three VIS exhibit similar information structures and process type distributions, which are predominately fact-oriented and then effective in expressing grief. Moreover, the audience show strong empathy towards the victim’s families and widely criticize the defendant and his mother for lacking remorse and apology, which may offer indirect insight into how such statements may influence judicial perceptions. This paper provides a linguistic perspective on how VIS function as tools of emotional expression and judicial reference, influencing perceptions of justice within the court and in broader social contexts.

Keywords: victim impact statement, discourse information theory, transitivity, ideational meaning, grief relief, verbal testimony

1. Introduction

Victim impact statements (VIS), one of the most significant advancements in the legal system, provides victims with an access to the criminal justice proceedings (Craig & Sailofsky, 2024; Erez & Rogers, 1999; Updegrove, 2020). Virtually during sentencing phases of both federal and state, victims and their families are entitled to VIS (Cassell, 2008; Gordon & Brodsky, 2007; Pitt, 2013). This judicial involvement is guaranteed by statutes in many countries of common law system, including *Victim and Witness Protection Act of 1982* in the US, *Criminal Code* in Canada, and *Criminal Justice Act* in England and Wales. The true harm of the alleged crime is recognized as an important element when making legal decisions (Boppre & Miller, 2014; Craig & Sailofsky, 2024; Lens et al., 2015). As Cassell (2008) agrees, VIS are conducive to conveying valuable information to jurors and judges (Sheley, 2020). In addition, VIS are becoming a kind of verbal testimony in court today. For example, according to *Ohio Revised Code* (Note 1), the court should concern a victim’s statement along with other factors that the court shall consider when making sentencing. Whereas laws in these jurisdictions also have accepted any matters that are in favor of mitigating the sentence (Paternoster & Deise, 2011). For example, *Criminal Justice Act 2003* authorizes courts to consider defendant’s remorse or his/her cooperation with the police as mitigating factors. Therefore, in this paper, for a better understanding of how ideational meanings of VIS in this case are realized, a mitigation statement delivered during the same sentencing hearing is included. It is examined using the same analytical approach as the VIS to offer comparative insight into how linguistic choices and information structures differ between victim expressions and defense appeals. In addition, this allows for a contrastive analysis of how grief-based and leniency-based emotional appeals are linguistically constructed and socially received.

Moreover, VIS has not only contributed to sentencing outcomes within the courtroom but also extended its impact on the whole society (Sheley, 2012, 2020). Since the COVID-19 pandemic made court proceedings more accessible through livestreams and online platforms, the public has gradually become more attentive to most sentence outcomes and individual utterance, where even a single word could potentially spark intense debate over various aspects of a case

(Boulanger-Bonnely, 2022). Consequently, VIS, as well as other statements in court, would potentially affect public attitudes towards all the parties involved. The public have their own perception of the case when they hear or participate online (Gallagher, 2018). In George Floyd's case, the audience write their own comments which display completely opposite attitudes towards the victim and the defendant. Drawing on the observable emotions expressed in public comments, this paper also incorporates comments collected online to examine how these statements shape audience perception. These comments may reflect emotional responses similar to those experienced by jurors or judges during the hearing, thereby offering an indirect reference for evaluating the potential influence of VIS on making sentence outcomes.

VIS, written in advance or delivered without preparation, are fundamentally composed of language. While previous research has focused on their legal, ethical, or procedural consideration, little attention has been paid to the language use which further contributes to their functions. This paper addresses this gap by exploring how VIS fulfill their dual objectives as a means to relieve grief for the victim's families and serving as verbal testimony in court. To this end, it analyzes three VIS and a mitigation statement from George Floyd's case and poses the following questions: (1) How are ideational meanings realized through linguistic choices and information structures? (2) How do these ideational meanings shape audience attitudes toward the case, thereby indicating the testimonial impact of VIS?

In addition, this case is selected not only for its legal and social significance, but also for its linguistic representativeness. It contains emotional courtroom discourse that is publicly accessible and widely discussed. The language use observed in VIS and the mitigation statement provides a basis for understanding how ideational meanings are realized in similar legal settings. The analytical approach used in this paper can be applied to other emotionally institutional texts. This paper therefore contributes to functional linguistics by offering a model for analyzing how language realize ideational meanings and affect the public in institutional discourse.

2. Related Work

2.1 Victim Impact Statement

Concerns about victims' rights in judicial participation emerged in the 1970s and continued through movements for victims' rights in the 1980s and early 1990s, culminating in the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Payne v. Tennessee* (Note 2) which was seen the admissibility of VIS in capital cases (Cassell, 2008; Craig & Sailofsky, 2024; Nadler & Rose, 2002). Since *Payne*, individual U.S. states have gained broad discretion over the admissibility and forms of VIS (Pitt, 2013; Updegrove, 2020). As a result, VIS have been widely adopted in criminal proceedings, and nowadays, ubiquitous and guaranteed by law in many territories and countries including Canada, Australia, England, and Wales (Roberts & Erez, 2004). Based on this, VIS have been extensively studied in the fields of law and criminology, particularly through empirical research and mock experiments (Lynch & Haney, 2009; Nuñez, Myers, Wilkowski, & Schweitzer, 2017; Roberts & Erez 2004). Findings on their impact mix. Some studies suggest that VIS have little effect on sentencing decision (Eisenberg, Garvey, & Wells, 2002), while others argue that they may contribute to harsher outcomes for defendants (Gillespie, Loughran, Smith, Fogel, & Bierregaard, 2014; Nuñez et al., 2017; Peace & Forrester, 2012), raising concerns about fairness and due process (Roberts, 2009). While some scholars contend that these statements evoke empathy from jurors and thus influence their judgements (Paternoster & Deise, 2011), others find no consistent association between the emotionality of such statements and sentencing outcomes (Myers, Weidemann, & Pearce, 2006; Peace & Forrester, 2012). Despite these conflicting claims, it is believed that VIS lead to the inclusiveness of the legal system. However, most existing research has centered on their legal and psychological functions, with limited attention to how VIS are linguistically constructed.

VIS are fundamentally composed of language, but linguistic analyses of their structure remain limited. Existing research has primarily focused on the genre and narrative features of VIS. For example, Bandes (2017) argues that rhetorical and literary storytelling in VIS, while emotionally powerful, may compromise legal neutrality and risk undermining defendants' rights. It underscores a tension between expressive justice and procedural fairness. In the context of sexual assault cases in Canada, VIS have been shown to reflect victims' fear of re-victimization or retaliation (Balfour, Du Mont & White, 2018), as authors find that institutional procedures constrain how victims present their statements, shaping the structure and content of VIS. Other studies have highlighted how VIS are used to describe and advocate for broader protection besides personal harm and trauma (Craig & Sailofsky, 2024). Abrams and Potts (2020), through their study of naming patterns, find that victims' lexical choices of everyday words or legal terms reveal not only their emotional framing but also their implicit understanding of the cases, which may influence sentencing outcomes. However, while these studies offer valuable insight into content and function of VIS, relatively little attention has been paid to how these statements are linguistically organized and structured (Englebrecht, 2008). This gap underscores the need for a more systematic discourse analysis of VIS, which this paper aims to address.

In the post-COVID era, increased online access to judicial proceedings provides the necessity to understand how the

public perceive VIS. To the beginning, victims are often physically or psychologically supported by not only their families but also broader social groups or communities (Campagna & Zaykowski, 2020; Campbell, Greeson, Fehler-Cabral, & Kennedy, 2015), making the study of VIS beyond the court highly significant. Besides, the expressive function of VIS also suggests that they are not merely directed to parties in court but also potentially to the audience (Manikis, 2015), as research finds that VIS can be significantly impactful on their audience (Buccioli & Zarri, 2020; Dembo, Mitra, & McKee, 2018). Some scholars have also agreed that VIS serve as an educator, shaping moral attitudes to the whole society and deterring potential offenders (Bandes 2021; Roberts 2008). Importantly, empirical evidence suggests that the emotional impact of VIS is not weakened when experienced via media (Button, Lewis, & Tapley, 2014). Despite these findings, few studies have examined how VIS are interpreted by the audience, particularly in cyberspace where lay reactions are freely expressed. To this end, investigating audience responses to VIS thus not only expands the understanding of their testimonial effect but also highlights their broader social significance.

In summary, although VIS have been widely studied in terms of their legal roles and emotional impact, limit attention has been paid to their language use and perception by the public. This leaves a space in understanding how VIS are linguistically organized to express grief and how their language may influence public attitudes, serving as an indirect reference of their testimonial effect on jurors and judges. To address these questions, this paper will combine the discourse analysis of VIS with an examination of public comments to explore how these statements in George Floyd's case achieve their dual objectives together.

2.2 Discourse Information Theory

Discourse Information Theory (DIT), first proposed by Du (2007), has developed as a framework for legal discourse analysis. It serves as a breakthrough of theoretical construction in forensic linguistics (Xu, 2016). DIT conceptualizes discourse as a tree information structure which clearly illustrate how information is organized, developed, and distributed (Du, 2007, 2013, 2015). Each tree information structure consists of the core proposition of the statement and multiple layers of supporting information. By employing DIT into discourse analysis, it is possible to segment, classify, and even calculating information based on different analytical aims. This theory enables the study of discourse from a macro perspective, making it particularly useful for examining information structures of VIS.

In recent years, DIT has been applied to a range of legal discourse to uncover how information is structured and conveyed. For example, it is used to explore the information processing strategies and persuasion effects in Chinese court mediation (Xu, 2017), as well as the information structures of legal case (Chen, 2017). Some scholars have extended its use to actual forensic applications such as authorship attribution (Yu, 2019) and speaker identification (Guan, 2019). As VIS are a genre that brings emotions to court (Schuster & Proppen, 2010), DIT is particularly well suited for examining their information structures in the following section.

In summary, DIT provides a structure-level framework for examining how information is hierarchically or linearly organized and logically connected in VIS. This is especially useful in identifying how victims' families prioritize certain themes, such as grief, loss, and justice, and how such structuring may influence the audience's perception of the case.

2.3 Transitivity System

Transitivity system was first put forward by Halliday in the 1960s as part of his systemic functional framework and was then expanded in his book *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1985). Later, this system is modified by himself and other scholars, such as Eggins and Matthiessen (Eggins, 2004; Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) provides a framework for interpreting meanings in terms of three metafunctions, of which the ideational metafunction concerns the linguistic choices people make to convey meanings about their inner and outer worlds and about those who inhabit those worlds (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). This metafunction is realized through transitivity system, which refers to how people choose lexico-grammar to interpret their experience.

Transitivity system has been widely applied in legal discourse analysis, including studies of narrative contestation between prosecution and defense attorneys (Cao & Yuan, 2023), parole hearings (Marko, Foltz, Haslacher, & Hall, 2023), closing arguments (Bartley, 2017, 2018), legal argumentation (Coulson, 2020), and even fraudulent news discourse (Sari, Santosa, Djatmika, & Wiratno, 2023). These studies demonstrate the usefulness of transitivity system in revealing how legal actors construct ideational meaning through linguistic choices. Building on this, the paper employs it to explore how victim's families convey meanings in their VIS to fulfill the expressive and testimonial functions.

Transitivity system, on the other hand, offers a clause-level perspective to analyze how ideational meanings are constructed through specific linguistic choices. By tracking the distribution of process types and participant roles, it reveals how content and emotions are linguistically encoded, thus shedding light on the emotional and testimonial functions of VIS in courtroom discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

On May 25, 2020, African American George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, as a white police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for over nine minutes. Floyd's death sparked massive protests across America against police brutality and racial discrimination. The trial began on March 29, 2021, and later on June 25, 2021, Chauvin was sentenced to 22.5 years in prison.

This paper analyzes three VIS with one mitigation statement as a supplement, all delivered during the sentencing hearing of Derek Chauvin on June 25, 2021. VIS were presented by George Floyd's nephew Brandon Williams, and his brothers, Terrence Floyd and Philonise Floyd. The mitigation statement was delivered by Chauvin's mother, Carolyn Pawlenty. Although the mitigation statement differs in its legal purpose as to argue for leniency rather than to express harm, it is included in this study as a comparative reference. Its inclusion allows for an analysis of how language is used to construct meaning, assign responsibility, and appeal to emotion from opposing positions within the same sentencing event. The aim is not to equate their judicial function, but to highlight how divergent goals are realized through distinct language use. All four statements were transcribed manually from a live-streamed recording of the hearing on YouTube, building a corpus of 1725 words.

In addition to the statements, 4245 public comments were collected using the YouTube Data API (Schultes, Dorner, & Lehner, 2013), providing a supplementary dataset for analyzing audience responses. Of those, 371 comments were sourced directly from the full-length video containing the entire sentencing hearing, while the rest were drawn from 12 additional video clips featuring individual statement segments uploaded by various news and media channels. All data are publicly available without identifiable private information involved. Specific comments are selected based on thematic relevance to the statements, either by identifying key lexical items from the statements as query terms or by choosing those located under the corresponding video clips. These comments aim to approximate public reception as judicial reference but are not intended to provide a representative reaction in the real court. However, it is acknowledged that these comments may include emotionally charged reactions or outlier content that does not avoid bias.

After data collection, all statements were manually annotated using two digital tools to facilitate linguistic analysis. Xmind, a mind-mapping software, was used to map the statements into tree information structures, where information units are organized at different levels and connected via information knots, in accordance with DIT principles. UAMCorpusTool6, a specialized annotation software providing either built-in or user-specified scheme for transitivity system, was used to annotate key linguistic features including process types, participant roles, and circumstances. Then the distributions of these linguistic features were compared across statements. To assess whether these features varied significantly between VIS and the mitigation statement, chi-square tests were conducted using RStudio.

3.2 Linguistic Features

According to DIT, one legal discourse can be divided into independent information units, each of which can convey a complete meaning. Typically, a single sentence can be seen as one information unit. Within a legal discourse, there is only one information unit regarded as kernel proposition (KN) highly summarizing the content of the discourse, akin to the title, and the rest of information units all lay under it, all information units exhibiting a tree-like hierarchical structure, as illustrated in Figure 1. Moreover, each information unit is associated, and the subordinate one at the lower level develops from the superordinate one at the higher level, with connections by information knots. There are 15 information knots.

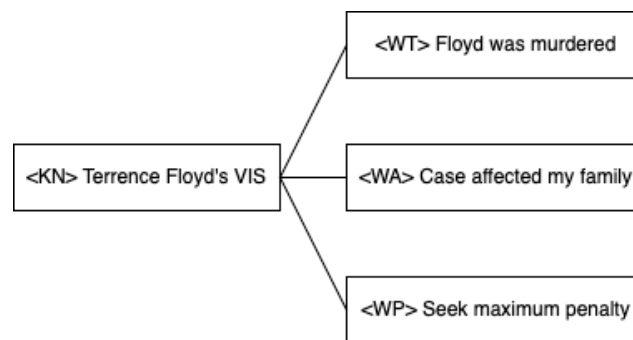


Figure 1. Part of tree information structure of Terrence's VIS

As can be seen in Figure 1, “Terrence Floyd’s VIS” is the KN, and the three parallel information units (‘Floyd was murdered’, ‘case affected my family’, and ‘seek maximum penalty’) follow the KN, showing how the information structure of this VIS is built. ‘WT’, ‘WA’ and ‘WP’ are information knots, of which WT denotes an act of ‘doing’ (here the act of being murdered primarily represents ‘Floyd was murdered’), WA means that ‘case affected my family’ is an attitude, and WP indicates that ‘seek maximum penalty’ is an opinion. The three information units that follow the KN here are at the same level in this information structure.

According to transitivity system, clauses can be analyzed through process types, participant roles, and circumstances. In this paper, clauses in statements are analyzed through the transitivity framework organized by Eggins in *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (2004), as illustrated in Figure 2.

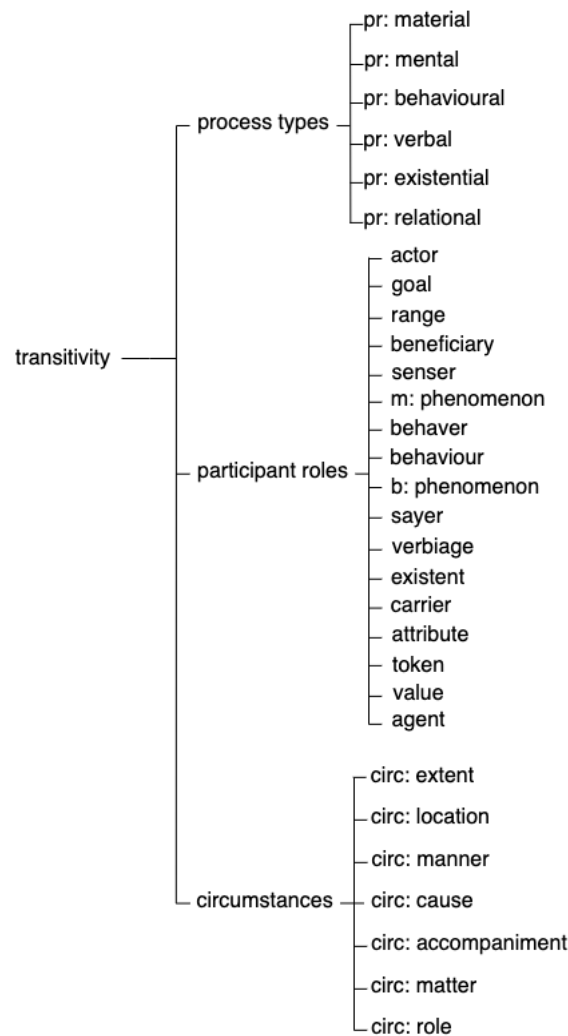


Figure 2. The transitivity framework

3.3 Analytical Approach

This study adopts a two-stage analytical approach to examine how VIS express grief, with public comment analysis integrated throughout to assess perceived impact. In the first stage, manual annotation is conducted following DIT's principles (Du, 2013, p175-182; 2015, p38-45), segmenting the statements into information units and linking them via information knots at different information levels based on logical and thematic relationships. This process leads to the mapping of each statement into a tree information structure. Then, information levels and knots are calculated, and analyzed from both hierarchical and linear arrangements to uncover how statements are structurally developed. Finally, information units are examined with selected public comments to explore what specific contents resonate strongly with the audience. In the second stage, the transitivity analysis is applied to explore how ideational meanings are realized at the clause level through process types, participant roles, and circumstances. Relevant public comments are again used to examine how these linguistic choices shape audience perceptions.

In summary, these two stages provide a comprehensive view of both the internal structure and external perceptions of VIS, thereby addressing the research questions in an integrated manner. Besides, this paper also highlights the linguistic and interpersonal distinctions between two contrasting courtroom narratives, one appealing to justice through grief, the other to leniency through familial defense.

4. Results

4.1 Analysis Based on Tree Information Structure

As mentioned previously, an information unit represents the central proposition of a sentence, typically condensed into fewer than five keywords (Du, 2015), see (1). The selection of an information unit's content primarily manifests the choice of an information knot (Xu, 2017), which demonstrates how subordinate information(s) evolves from its superordinate information.

(1) information unit: conclusion in agony

original sentence: As I wrecked my brain and thought about what I could say today, I came to this conclusion.

Upon annotation of information knots, the most four common types are WA, WT, WF, and WY, accounting for 35, 26, 16, 14 instances respectively. WA is about the attitude or judgement, while WY explains the reason. WF and WT concern a fact or a concrete act. To facilitate research, this paper categorizes all information knots into two groups based on their own nature and functions. Facts, events, or changes are classified into Group A, while those describing speaker's attitudes or judgement are placed into Group B. The distribution of information knots can illustrate how information develops and is organized (Du, 2015). As a result, the distribution of Group A and Group B at each level are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of information knot groups

| Speaker Group | Brandon Williams | | Terrence Floyd | | Philonise Floyd | | Carolyn Pawlenty | |
|---------------|------------------|--------|----------------|--------|-----------------|--------|------------------|--------|
| | GroupA | GroupB | GroupA | GroupB | GroupA | GroupB | GroupA | GroupB |
| Level 1 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| Level 2 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 7 | 3 | 2 | 9 |
| Level 3 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| Level 4 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| Level 5 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Level 6 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Level 7 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 15 | 10 | 22 | 7 | 12 | 7 | 13 | 18 |

Upon calculation, the chi-square test displays no statistically significant difference among three VIS ($X^2 = 1.7138$, $p = 0.4245 > 0.05$). However, compared with the mitigation statement, the result exhibits significant differences in the use of information knots ($X^2 = 8.9093$, $p = 0.002837 < 0.05$). Results signify that the proportion of two groups of information knots Floyd's family and Chauvin's mother use in their statements significantly differs. In closer inspection, Group A occurs at each level of the information structure, but Group B does not appear at the same level. The total number of information knots in Group A consistently exceeds those in Group B. Furthermore, knots of facts and acts are less used than knots of attitudes in the mitigation statement. To be specific, VIS concentrate more on the crime itself with an attempt to present verbal testimony, while the mitigation statement primarily features personal attitudes and evaluations.

In short, the statistical difference between VIS and the mitigation statement suggests not only a variation in information structure but also a difference in rhetorical intentions. VIS emphasize factual and emotionally grounded testimony, while the mitigation statement relies more on personal judgment without narrative support.

An information unit carries specific content, which is not only linked hierarchically to its adjacent units by information knots, but also compared linearly with other units at the same level, with these two modes of combination making the information structure a tree-like network (Du, 2007; Xu, 2017). This paper observes information knots and information units via these two modes to see the relationship between them, thereby examining how they construct information structures and what effect these have on the audience.

4.1.1 Hierarchical Arrangement

This paper initially focuses on the hierarchical arrangement of information knots, where each subordinate information unit develops from its own superordinate unit. Concisely, all these units could form a complete paragraph within the statement. In three VIS, information knots predominantly serve the function of describing facts or actions, with WF, WT being the dominant types, see (2). To clarify information knots, information extracted from these statements will be attached with an angled brackets $\langle \rangle$, in which the label of an information knot will be included.

(2) <WA> Unimaginable decision to kill Floyd

<WF> Chauvin is with his family

<WF> Gianna lost her father

<WF> Activities without Floyd

In this extract, Brandon's VIS comprises four information units of which "unimaginable decision to kill Floyd" is at the upper level, while each subsequent unit develops from its superordinate unit. Three are about facts (WT), and one is about attitude (WA). In the first unit, Brandon explicitly expresses his grief and condemnation of this "unimaginable" murder. Later, he notes that although Chauvin will be sentenced, he will not lose his family, using the word "luxury" to highlight the contrast that they will not have Floyd back though justice comes. In the final two units, Brandon discusses the impact of Chauvin's murder on Gianna, emphasizing that she will not enjoy such "luxury" throughout her life and during significant life events. This structure makes his statement emotionally resonant as comments indicate that the audience have been influenced:

Comment 1: "Absolutely heartbreaking".

Comment 2: "I am so sorry for your loss of George Floyd".

However, it should be noted that the audience comments serve primarily as reflections of public sentiment in response to the statements, rather than indicators of judicial influence or legal consequences.

Philonise's VIS also exhibits a similar feature as Brandon's. That is, a judgement or an attitude is supported by facts, see (3).

(3) <WA> Our lives matter

<WA> We are given life sentence

<WF> We cannot get Floyd back

This 'WA-WF' pattern proves that "we"- Philonise and his family- are severely affected by Floyd's death. They are not the defendant sentenced by judges in court, but they are the victims that suffer the pain of losing a loved one, which is in fact a kind of "life sentence". As comments say:

Comment 3: "I pray for George Floyd's brother Philonise and the rest of his family to find some peace".

Comment 4: "This made me cry. I can't even imagine losing my sibling or kids or parents or anything".

However, information units in Carolyn's statement are more connected by WA which displays personal evaluations of Chauvin and the case lacking factual support, see (4).

(4) <WT> Our life changed

<WA> Chauvin is quiet, thoughtful, honorable and selfless

<WA> Only my family know

<WT> We support him

It is fact that Chauvin will be sentenced, and Floyd is dead have already changed the lives of both parties involved in this murder case. In this extract, Carolyn evaluates Chauvin as "a quiet, thoughtful, honorable, and selfless man" in her words, with such merits known only to his family and not the audience, thereby supporting Chauvin "100 percent" and believing he should not be treated as an offender. However, such good qualities do not match the action Chauvin keels on Floyd's neck to suffocate him. These words do not change the audience's attitudes towards Chauvin but contrarily intensify their negative evaluation of him:

Comment 5: "So he was knelling on George Floyd to be kind and caring".

Comment 6: "So she supports him 100% even while he killed someone".

Taken together, VIS show a tendency to build emotional relief in factual description, using WF and WT to establish context before introducing attitudinal evaluations. This pattern contrasts markedly with the mitigation statement, where evaluative statements appear with minimal factual grounding.

4.1.2 Linear Arrangement

In addition, linear arrangement of information knots considers those at the same level, where various subordinate information units develop from the same superordinate unit. If the subordinate one is KN, then subordinate ones can be considered as the opening of each paragraph within the statement, see (5).

(5) <WT> My life changed

<WT> I speak to the world; <WT> I beg for justice; <WF> I constantly have nightmares; <WT> I watch videos of Floyd's being killed; <WT> I lift my voice tirelessly

In (5), “my life changed” serves as the superordinate information unit in Philonise's VIS, going into detail by five subordinate information units at the next level. All their information knots belong to Group A describing facts or concrete actions. These facts clearly evince that Floyd's death has left a considerable impact on Philonise's daily life. He hasn't “had a real night's sleep” and watches “the video of George dying for hours over and over again”. Since the murder, he has been seeking justice for Floyd despite of his acute distress. Comments show sympathy for his grief:

Comment7: “So sorry for your loss”.

Comment8: “I pray for George Floyd's brother Philonise and the rest of his family to find some peace”.

4.2 Analysis under the Transitivity Framework

What speaker's focus can be represented by linguistic choices. In SFL, each linguistic choice is driven by meaning (Huang, 2017). Transitivity system assigns different roles to victim and defendant by distinguishing process types in a clause (Cao & Yuan, 2023), as distinct process types reflect speakers' experience in their inner and outer worlds. To be specific, transitivity serves as the central mechanism for realizing ideational meaning, that is, how language represents actions, thoughts, and relationships in the world. Thus, this paper examines how ideational meanings of each VIS are realized through specific linguistic choices, reflecting their expressive objective, and then see what impacts they have on the audience to achieve the testimonial objective. It initially identifies process types across three VIS with one mitigation statement. Distributions are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of process types (Freq: Frequency; PCT: Percentage)

| Speaker Process | Brandon Williams | | Terrence Floyd | | Philonise Floyd | | Carolyn Pawlenty | |
|--------------------|------------------|--------|----------------|--------|-----------------|--------|------------------|--------|
| | Freq | PCT | Freq | PCT | Freq | PCT | Freq | PCT |
| Material | 27 | 47.37% | 21 | 38.89% | 34 | 66.67% | 23 | 32.86% |
| Mental | 11 | 19.30% | 11 | 20.37% | 7 | 13.73% | 21 | 30.00% |
| Behavioural | 0 | 0.00% | 1 | 1.85% | 0 | 0.00% | 0 | 0.00% |
| Verbal | 8 | 14.04% | 5 | 9.26% | 3 | 5.87% | 8 | 11.43% |
| Existential | 1 | 1.75% | 1 | 1.85% | 0 | 0.00% | 1 | 1.43% |
| Relational | 10 | 17.54% | 15 | 27.78% | 7 | 13.73% | 17 | 24.28% |
| Total | 57 | 100% | 54 | 100% | 51 | 100% | 70 | 100% |

Upon annotation of process types in these statements, there are a total of 232 types. Among them, material processes are predominant, numbering 105, accounting for 45.26%. Mental processes and relational processes are followed, with 50 and 49 respectively, each comprising 21.55% and 21.12%. Verbal processes are at the fourth, with 24 in total, accounting for 10.34%. Existential processes and behavioural processes only hold a minor proportion, with 3 and 1 in count. After calculation, the chi-square test reveals no statistically significant difference among three VISs ($X^2 = 10.122$, $p = 0.1196 > 0.05$). However, the result ($X^2 = 17.494$, $p = 0.04152 < 0.05$) indicates that the mitigation statement has significant differences from VIS in the use of process types.

4.2.1 Material Processes

Material processes have the highest frequency within each statement. The constituent of the clause who performs the action is Actor, while the participant at whom the process is directed is Goal. In VIS, material processes are primarily used to describe facts and acts. At the beginning of VIS, Floyd's family employ material processes to depict the incident, with the explicit use of word “kill” or “murder”, see (6).

(6a) In the malicious and insidious display of hate and abuse of power, Chauvin killed George.

(6b) One year ago, May 25, my brother George was murdered by Derek Chauvin [...]

(6c) On May 25, 2020, my brother was murdered, everyone knows, by Derek Chauvin.

After making a brief restatement of the incident, they begin to talk about the harm from Floyd's death, which occupies the largest portion of the VIS overall, see (7).

(7a) As I wreck my brain [...]

(7b) The sudden murder of George has forever traumatized us.

Verbs of “wreck” and “traumatize” are of violent actions, associating with negative traits. Moreover, first-person pronouns being as Actor or Goal, maintain that it is “me” who suffer a lot of pain from Floyd's death. There also position VIS as a means of emotional relief.

In (8), Philonise used material processes like “be able to walk” and “attend” with a negation to note that warm parent-child activities in the future cannot happen anymore. Presented in a chronological timeline can make what people

say more descriptive (Sheley, 2012). The audience can imagine a wedding and daddy-daughter dance without a father's presence, feeling the pain and sorrow of losing a loved one. These acts as verbal testimony for judges and jurors to think about the prospective damage caused by this case.

(8) He would never be able to walk Gianna down the aisle in her wedding, attend those magical moments of her life like a daddy-daughter dance [...]

Comments show sympathy to Floyd's family:

Comment 9: "I pray that you, your family and sweet Ginna will find some closure".

Comment 10: "I never met George Floyd or his brother, but the way his brother spoke made me feel like I just lost my brother".

These responses reflect a deep sense of empathetic alignment with Philonise, with commenters expressing both personal grief and communal solidarity.

However, material processes in Carolyn's statement are used to describe Chauvin's job with an attempt to change public's impression on him, see (9).

(9a) Derek always dedicated his life and time to the police department.

(9b) [...] he always has put others before his own.

In (9a), the Goal "his life and time" and the Beneficiary (which benefits from the process) "to the police department" reveal the outcome and target of the process "dedicated", which depicts Chauvin places high importance to work, suggesting a strong sense of responsibility. In (9b), the Goal "other" conveys Chauvin takes priority to the needs of others, indicating a positive character of selflessness. However, such portraits of Chauvin's occupation intensify the gap between his duty of safeguarding the nation and people and his intentional murder, as the audience have negative comments on her words:

Comment 11: "You could sense the disconnection between Derek and his mother".

Comment 12: "Quit, put others before his own, he is thoughtful, listen this wicked".

4.2.2 Mental Processes

Mental processes encode thinking and feeling, which can be categorized into affection, representing individuals' attitudes and desires towards objective entities; perception, involving how individuals use their senses to perceive the external world; and cognition, describing how humans understand the world through mental activities. As illustrated in Table 3, cognition appears most frequently, followed by perception. It reveals that simply expressing personal distaste or anger is not taken by both parties. Cognition tells aftereffects of the crime, see (10).

Table 3. Distribution of mental processes

| Mental Process | Freq | PCT |
|----------------|------|--------|
| Affection | 0 | 0.00% |
| Perception | 14 | 28.00% |
| Cognition | 36 | 72.00% |
| Total | 50 | 100% |

(10) [...] and not knowing what a good night's sleep is anymore.

In Terrence's VIS, he asks a series of questions to Chauvin, seeking his reason and motive, see (11). Generally, it is not allowed to facilitate a dialogue when making a VIS. By posing questions that do not require answers from Chauvin, Terrence essentially hurled his accusation against Chauvin, indicating he is severely afflicted by Floyd's death. As what the public comment, Terrence's inquiries have resonated with them.

(11) I wanted to know from the man himself, why? What were you thinking? What was going through your head when you had your knee on my brother's neck?

Comment 13: "We all want to know why he did what he did".

Comment 14: "When he started speaking directly to Chauvin asking why brought tears to my eyes".

These findings reflect the ability of VIS to represent not only external events, such as loss and injustice, but also the internal psychological experiences of trauma and reflection. This balance of outer and inner world representation aligns with the ideational metafunction central to SFL.

4.2.3 Relational Processes

Relational processes are the third most common. Both parties use more of these processes to carry the attribute than to make definitions. Floyd's family rarely use them to characterize Floyd, while most of the time they focus on the case

itself, see (12). Carrier in clauses classified by Attribute shows impact of this murder: Floyd is dead, and Ginna loses her father; all become history, and all are testimony of their lost.

(12a) [...] one thing we cannot get back is George Floyd.

(12b) These are all luxuries that my young cousin Gianna was robbed of [...]

(12c) [...] this is history [...]

Unlike VIS which frequently employ material processes to detail trauma and loss, the mitigation statement relies more heavily on relational processes to assert character traits, often unsupported by factual elaboration. This contrast underscores the testimonial role of VIS with the defensive positioning of the mitigation statement.

4.2.4 Verbal Processes

Verbal processes are not frequently used. Brandon uses them to note a high degree of difficulty to perform VIS, see (13), with negators being together, indicating his emotional struggles faced in this communicative act. Terrence employs verbal processes coupled with modal verb phrases such as “have to”, showing his obligations to make a VIS possibly due to his moral responsibility to his daughter in this case, and his mission to fight against racial discrimination which is deemed as one reason why Chauvin kneeled on Floyd’s neck until he died, see (14). Contrarily, Carolyn uses verbal processes to defend Chauvin and provide comfort to him, see (15).

(13a) It is humanly impossible for me to [...] convey or articulate the right words [...]

(13b) Words simply cannot express the pain, anguish, and suffering [...]

(14) [...] I have to talk to my daughter and tell her [...] about his niece, his uncle, about the situation.

(15a) I can tell you that is far from the truth.

(15b) I promise you I will stay strong as we talked about [...] I will do what you told me to do, take care of myself.

Additionally, either Sayer or Receiver in their words are mostly first-person pronouns, five times more than “you”. It is a direct reflection of personal experience and emotions, while similarly used but triggering different comments:

Comment 15: “All about ‘me’, what about poor George & his family”.

Comment 16: “Her statement was very selfish. Me, my family, my legacy, my feelings, my hurt...”.

4.2.5 Behavioural and Existential Processes

The rest of process types are behavioural and existential process, accounting for one and three instances. Behavioural process is found in Terrence Floyd’s VIS when he describes the past memory with Floyd to show their life is ruined, see (16).

(16) And as I looked at the video of my niece [...] (that can’t happen.)

Existential processes are used with negators to describe an absence of a situation against real situations. In (17a), Brandon notes the absence of Floyd in Gianna’s future, stressing a termination of traditional parental companionship. In (17b), Terrence indicates a hypothesis resulting from role reversal, exposing inequity and prejudice rooted in real life.

(17a) There will be no more birthday parties, no graduations, holiday gatherings [...]

(17b) If the roles were reversed, there wouldn’t be a case.

In summary, from a systemic functional perspective, the predominance of material and mental processes in VIS illustrates how speakers linguistically construe both the external circumstances of loss and their internal emotional responses. These choices support the expressive function of VIS as vehicles of grief relief while also contributing to their testimonial role in conveying the moral and legal consequences of the crime.

4.3 From Structure to Clauses

This paper adopts a two-stage analytical approach to examine how VIS fulfill their dual objectives of grief relief and verbal testimony. While each stage addresses different aspects of the statements, they are theoretically and functionally complementary in revealing how meaning is constructed and received. Although the mitigation statement differs in legal function from VIS, it is included as a contrastive reference for comparison. This allows for an exploration of how differing rhetorical purposes are reflected through language use, especially when both types of statements are situated within the same sentencing hearing.

DIT provides a macro-structural perspective. It illustrates how speakers hierarchically and linearly organize information to foreground personal experiences and affective appeals. Through this structure, grief is depicted and visualized. In contrast, transitivity analysis operates at the micro-clausal level. It uncovers how ideational meanings are realized

clause-by-clause via the interplay of specific process types, participant roles, and circumstances. It also reveals how speakers represent actions and construct relationships emotionally and socially. To be specific, these two stages offer a comprehensive view of meaning-making. DIT reveals how emotional content is organized, while transitivity shows how emotional, factual, and moral meanings are realized. This integrated approach enables a deeper understanding of how VIS operate simultaneously as expressive means for pain and as persuasive tools aimed at influencing legal judgments.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigates how VIS fulfill their dual objectives as means to relieve grief and as verbal testimony through a two-stage analysis based on DIT and transitivity system. Findings show that VIS are structurally organized to foreground emotional and factual content, primarily using material and mental processes to express pain, trauma, loss, and moral judgment. Compared with the mitigation statement, VIS exhibit clearer factual grounding and affective coherence, which appear to resonate more strongly with the audience, as reflected in comments. These findings suggest that emotionally salient linguistic choices, such as evaluative information knots and high-transitivity material processes, not only convey grief but also shape how justice is interpreted and emotionally received by the public.

While this paper offers a detailed examination of VIS from a single high-profile trial, the scope remains limited. Although this paper incorporates online comments to explore the perceived reception of VIS, it is acknowledged that such audience reactions do not directly reflect judicial reasoning or sentencing impact. Future research may extend this approach to a larger dataset across different cases. Integrating multimodal analysis may also help to enrich the understanding of VIS.

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Notes

Note 1. Ohio Revised Code § 2930.14 (2006).

Note 2. *Payne v. Tennessee*, 501 U.S. 808 (1991).