MATERIAL PROCESSES IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE RESTAURANT REVIEWS: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the realization of Material processes in English and Vietnamese restaurant reviews from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), with particular reference to Halliday's Transitivity system. Drawing on a corpus of 300 five-star restaurant reviews (150 English and 150 Vietnamese) collected from TripAdvisor, the research examines how experiential meaning is constructed through action-oriented language in evaluative discourse. A total of 1,544 Material clauses were identified and analyzed in terms of process subtypes (Doing vs. Happening), participant roles, and clause configurations. The findings reveal that Material processes constitute a major proportion of experiential meaning in both languages, reflecting the central role of concrete actions in representing dining experiences. While both English and Vietnamese display broadly similar distributions, notable differences emerge: Vietnamese reviews show a stronger preference for Doing clauses with explicit Actor–Goal configurations, whereas English reviews employ a higher proportion of Happening clauses, often backgrounding agency. These contrasts are interpreted in relation to typological differences between the two languages and genre-specific communicative purposes. The study contributes to contrastive functional linguistics and offers practical implications for discourse analysis, translation, and language pedagogy.

Keywords: Material process; Transitivity; restaurant reviews; comparative analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, restaurant review discourse has emerged as an increasingly important object of linguistic inquiry, particularly in the context of rapidly expanding digital communication and online review platforms such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Foody. These reviews serve a dual function: they not only reflect writers' personal experiences with dining establishments but also operate as a form of persuasive discourse that significantly influences consumer behavior within communities. Understanding the linguistic mechanisms through which these reviews construct meaning is therefore essential for comprehending their communicative effectiveness and social impact.

To investigate how restaurant reviews represent experiential reality, this study employs Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework (1994, 2004), specifically focusing on the Transitivity system. According to Halliday, our most powerful impression of experience is that "it consists of 'going-on'—happening, doing, sensing, meaning, and being and becoming. As well as being a mode of action, of giving and demanding goods-&-services and information, the clause is a mode of reflection, of imposing order on the endless variation and flow of events. The grammatical system by which this is achieved is Transitivity"

(Halliday, 1994, p.106; Halliday, 2012, p.235). The Transitivity system analyzes experiential meaning through the interrelationship of three semantic components: Process types (representing different kinds of goings-on), Participant types (entities involved in these processes), and Circumstance types (contextual elements surrounding processes). This analytical framework provides systematic tools for examining how language users encode and communicate their experiences of reality.

Within the Transitivity system, Halliday identifies six process types: Material, Behavioral, Verbal, Mental, Relational, and Existential processes. While these process types have been extensively developed for English, scholars such as Hoang Van Van (2002, 2005) have successfully adapted this framework for Vietnamese linguistic analysis. This study specifically focuses on Material process in English and Vietnamese restaurant review discourse, examining how this process is realized through verbal groups that function as the structural nucleus of clauses. The selection of Material processes as the analytical focus, rather than other process types, is justified by their fundamental role in restaurant review discourse. Material processes, representing processes of doing and happening, are particularly significant in reviews where authors describe concrete dining experiences—food preparation methods, service actions, and consumption activities. Unlike Mental processes that encode perception and cognition, or Relational processes that establish attributes and identities, Material processes convey the tangible, observable actions that constitute the dining experience itself. These action-oriented linguistic choices form the experiential foundation upon which evaluative commentary is constructed, making them central to understanding how reviews represent and reconstruct dining reality for prospective customers.

The analysis of Material processes is significant for several reasons. First, it reveals how reviewers construct experiential meaning through action-oriented language, thereby influencing reader perceptions of restaurant quality. Second, it demonstrates how English and Vietnamese employ different lexicogrammatical resources to encode physical actions, contributing to contrastive linguistic understanding between typologically distinct languages. Third, understanding Material process patterns provides practical insights for effective review writing and translation, as these processes serve as the experiential backbone upon which persuasive discourse is built.

Therefore, this study aims to achieve four primary objectives: (1) to gain a comprehensive understanding of Material process realization in English and Vietnamese restaurant reviews; (2) to identify the most common and functionally efficient patterns of Material processes in both languages; (3) to determine cross-linguistic differences in how Material processes are deployed within review discourse; and (4) to derive practical implications for readers, writers, and translators working with restaurant review texts. By examining Material processes specifically, this research illuminates the foundational layer of meaning-making in restaurant reviews, offering both theoretical contributions to SFL applications in evaluative discourse and practical implications for cross-cultural communication in the restaurant industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. The Transitivity system
The Transitivity system serves as the central theoretical framework for this study. According to Halliday (1985, 1994, 2004), the Ideational metafunction activates the Transitivity system at the lexicogrammatical level. This system provides the grammatical resources through which

speakers construe their experience of reality, organizing experiential meaning into three semantic categories: Process (the action, event, or state represented by the verbal group), Participant (the entities involved in the process), and Circumstance (contextual elements such as time, place, manner, and cause surrounding the process) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.169).

Halliday (1981) identifies three fundamental grammatical systems corresponding to the three metafunctions of language: (i) Theme as "the grammar of discourse," (ii) Mood as "the grammar of speech function," and (iii) Transitivity as "the grammar of experience." More specifically, Halliday (1981, p.134) defines Transitivity as "the grammar of the clause" functioning as "a structural unit" for "the expression of a particular range of ideational meanings." He further argues that this domain constitutes "the foundation stone of the organization of experiential meaning," encompasses "all participant functions where all experiential functions are clause-bound" (Halliday, 1981, p.134). Through Transitivity analysis, clauses become more comprehensible as readers gain insight into the characteristic processes encoded within them (Halliday, 1985, p.131). However, as Hoang Van Van (2005, p.142) notes, "Analyzing clauses into Process, Participant, and Circumstance does not yet tell us much about the nature of how experiential meaning is reflected in the clause. Therefore, what is truly necessary when analyzing clause meaning is to analyze it at a certain level of delicacy so that the function of each category can be specified. This suggests that when investigating the Transitivity system of a language, one must pay deeper attention to different Process types, different Participant types, and different Circumstance types."

Building on the above principles, Halliday (1985, 2004) identifies six distinct process types: Material processes (processes of doing and happening), Mental processes (processes of sensing, thinking, and feeling), Relational processes (processes of being and having), Behavioral processes (processes of physiological and psychological behavior), Verbal processes (processes of saying), and Existential processes (processes of existing). Through these six process types and their associated transitivity configurations, language provides speakers with systematic choices for expressing different types of experience and representing the world.

2.2. Material processes in the Transitivity system
Definition
Material processes construe our experience of the world of doing and happening—including actions, activities, and events that unfold around us (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These processes typically represent dynamic physical actions and "a quantum of change in the flow of events" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.171) taking place through entities acting in space and time with some input of energy needed to initiate the process. The fundamental semantic configuration of Material processes expresses the meaning that some entity does something, often extending to affect another entity. Importantly, Material processes are not limited to concrete physical actions but can also represent abstract actions. The entities involved—called participants—may be things or phenomena of our experience, including animate beings, inanimate objects, or even abstractions. This versatility makes Material processes fundamental to construing both physical and metaphorical domains of experience.

To identify Material processes and distinguish them from other process types, Hoang Van Van proposes three key recognition criteria: (i) the number and nature of participants involved, (ii) co-occurrence with directional verbs, and (iii) diagnostic probing through question-answer patterns (Hoang Van Van, 2005, p. 160).

Functional elements

Material process clauses organize the phenomena of experience according to specific transitivity configurations with distinct functional elements. According to Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) and Gerot & Wignell (1994), Material clauses obligatorily contain certain elements and may optionally include additional ones. Obligatory elements include Process – realized by a verb or verbal group denoting action (e.g., catch, run, replace, open, pour, bring), and Actor – the inherent participant realized by a noun or nominal group; the doer or entity from which the process emanates. Optional elements consist of Goal – an additional participant representing the entity affected by or brought into existence through the process, Beneficiary – subdivided into Recipient (one who receives goods) or Client (one for whom services are performed), Range – an entity that specifies the scope of the process without being affected by it, and Circumstance – contextual elements providing information about time, place, manner, cause, etc.

Subtypes

According to Halliday (1994, p. 110), Material processes are divided into two subtypes: Doing subtypes, which express that some entity materially does something that may extend to affect another entity, and Happening subtypes, which express that something is happening or has happened. These processes can be probed diagnostically: Happening clauses respond to questions such as "What is happening/happened to the entity?" while Doing clauses answer "What did the entity do?" or "What did the entity do to the other entity?"

Participant roles

Material processes typically involve one or two inherent participants. The Actor is the person or entity that performs an action, while the Goal is the person or entity affected by or brought about through the process (Hoang Van Van, 2005, p.196). It can be realized through the structural configuration: [Actor + Process: Material + Goal]. The Goal may either be brought into existence through the action (e.g., "pour a cup of tea," "make a cake") or exist prior to the action but be affected in some way. In the latter case, the Goal may be accompanied by an expression of the result of the impact, such as a new location (e.g., "Nam pushed the chair into the corner") or quality (e.g., "She cleaned the table"). In this respect, Goal differs from Range, as the process does not impact the Range in any way. The Beneficiary can be identified by examining its position in the clause, typically following the Goal. It is realized by a prepositional phrase—usually with "for" in English or "cho" in Vietnamese—marking it as either a Recipient type of Beneficiary (one who receives goods) or a Client type of Beneficiary (one for whom services are performed) (Hoang Van Van, 2005, p.196). Table 1 shows some examples of Material processes.

Table 1. Examples of Material clauses and their typical participants.

Type	Language	Actor	Material Process	Goal	Beneficiary	Range
Doing	English	The server	poured	tea	for the guests	
	Vietnamese	Nhân viên (Waiter)	Mang (bring)	đồ ăn ra (food)	cho chúng tôi (for us)	
Happening	English	The ball	is rolling			
	Vietnamese	Hắn (He)	trèo (climbed)			cây (the tree)

2.3. Overview of restaurant review discourse

According to Henning-Thurau et al. (2004), a review is defined as any positive or negative evaluative statement made by (former) customers about a product or service, which is shared with a multitude of people. A review gives an opinion about anything from a restaurant to a concert. The most common types of review are film reviews, book reviews, restaurant review, music reviews, television programme reviews, theatre performance reviews, computer games…

A restaurant review is "a description and evaluation of the experience of eating in a restaurant" (Blank, 2007, p.45). Hsiao-I Hou (2012) asserts that restaurant reviews emphasize restaurant assessment and business-to-consumer orientation adhere to certain standards. Reputedly originating in 18th-century France, restaurant reviewing became more widespread and affirm its role and importance in the service industry. Reviews of restaurants are a great way to learn about new or underappreciated cuisines as they influence eating choices, and restaurateurs think that reviews may have a favorable or bad impact on their business (Moir, 2007). The impact of restaurant reviews was noted by Dornenburg and Page (1998, p.17), who said that "they help to determine what we as a nation value in dining out" and that "they are an important source of restaurant information" for readers. As a consequence, restaurant reviews have a significant impact on patrons and restaurant owners in a variety of striking ways. De Jong and Burgers (2013) argue that restaurant reviews fall into different genres: professional reviews and inexperienced consumer reviews, online reviews and offline reviews.

While discussing restaurant reviews, it would be hard to overlook the substantial quantity of user-generated content available online. Although professionally written consumer product reviews have been available in mass media venues for decades, the ability of any consumer to publicly share their experiences and reactions to a product or service, as well as to reach a large, interested audience worldwide, is a digital practice for which there is no exact analog precedent. In the last fifteen years, online user-generated customer reviews, or eWOM, have emerged as a new media genre (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Since reviews are no longer restricted to a small number of elite reviewers (such as professional travel writers, celebrity film reviewers, or cuisine critics), anybody with an opinion and an internet connection may now call themselves a "specialist". Titz et al. (2004) state that while eWOM is the most recent development in the restaurant review genre, its form and content may nevertheless be very comparable to those of reviews in conventional printed media. Vásquez & Chik (2015) describe the emergence of consumer reviews as part of the democratization of the restaurant industry,

which is a shift from a few elite restaurant reviewers to a cultural activity that anyone can participate in.

2.4. Previous studies

Research on Material processes within the SFL framework has garnered attention from both international and Vietnamese scholars, though with varying emphases and applications.

International studies

International research on Material processes has primarily focused on their identification and analysis across diverse linguistic contexts and text types. Mahdi's (2014) investigation of the Besemah language represents a significant contribution to understanding Material processes in regional languages. Employing Halliday's SFL, the study identified 12 Material process verbs and documented their participant roles—including Actor, Goal, Recipient, Client, and Range— alongside three clause pattern categories: intransitive, mono-transitive, and ditransitive. This research demonstrates the applicability of SFL to lesser-studied languages. Another related study by Sabbachat et al. (2014) aims to contribute to a better understanding of how Material processes are realized in English clauses and which transitivity verbs instantiate Material processes. Specifically, it seeks to (i) identify the types of verbs in the transitivity system that realize Material process and (ii) examine how this processare used in English clauses. The study adopts a descriptive–comparative method. The findings indicate that a range of transitivity verbs can function as realizations of Material processes. In addition, Daulay's analysis of C.S. Lewis's The Chronicles of Narnia (2020) exemplifies the application of Material processes to literary discourse. Their study identified 107 Material process clauses across two chapters, with dominant verbs including "come," "sail," "turn," and "go." The researchers emphasized three core elements—Actor, Material process, and Goal—and argued that Material processes enable writers to express complex ideas while encouraging readers to engage with systemic functional linguistics beyond traditional grammar frameworks.

Domestic studies

Vietnamese scholarship has demonstrated more specialized attention to material processes within both monolingual and cross-linguistic contexts. Hoang Van Van's (2005) pioneering work provides comprehensive grammatical description of Material processes in Vietnamese, establishing crucial semantic and lexicogrammatical criteria for identifying and distinguishing Material processes from other transitivity system options. This foundational study addresses three fundamental questions: defining Material processes in Vietnamese, establishing identification criteria, and mapping available options within the Material process environment. Hoang Van Van's research represents the theoretical cornerstone for subsequent Vietnamese SFL studies. Vuong Thị Hoan (2018) advanced this scholarship through comparative analysis, investigating linguistic features of Material processes in English and Vietnamese agricultural texts—specifically Howard M. Resh's Hobby Hydroponics and Nguyen Xuan Nguyen's Hydroponic Techniques and Clean Vegetable Production. This cross-linguistic approach marks an important methodological development, demonstrating how Material processes operate differently across languages within specialized discourse.

Research gaps

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain. First, there is limited research examining Material processes in evaluative discourse, particularly restaurant reviews, which combine descriptive and persuasive functions. Second, while Vuong Thi Loan's work initiates cross-

linguistic comparison, comprehensive contrastive analyses of Material process realization in English and Vietnamese across various registers remain scarce. The above studies establish foundational understandings of Material processes across different languages and genres, yet they remain limited in scope, focusing primarily on individual languages or literary texts without comparative dimensions. Third, existing studies focus predominantly on written narrative or technical texts, leaving conversational and review genres underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by examining Material process realization in restaurant review discourse across English and Vietnamese, contributing to both contrastive linguistics and genre-specific applications of SFL.

3. METHODS
The following stages were done for data collection and analysis.

3.1. First Stage
15 Michelin restaurants in Hanoi – Vietnam and 15 Michelin restaurants in New York – US were selected for research. They include 5 traditional restaurants, 5 European-style restaurants and 5 Asian-style restaurants. All the selected restaurants are famous in in Hanoi city – Vietnam and New York city – US and received Michelin stars. The Michelin star is one of the oldest restaurant guides, awarding stars to recognize excellent restaurants around the world.

3.2. Second Stage
In the second stage, a total of 300 reviews were selected, comprising 150 in Vietnamese and 150 in English, with a maximum of 10 reviews per restaurant. The author adopted a deliberate sampling approach to ensure that the reviews analyzed were both authentic and comparable across languages. Reviews were gathered from TripAdvisor, where the filter mode was applied to select only those with a 5/5 star rating and time frame from 2021 to 2025. To guarantee linguistic accuracy, we included only reviews originally written in either Vietnamese or English, explicitly excluding any entries generated through Google Machine Translation. From the pool of eligible reviews, we manually screened the texts based on word length, retaining only those that contained a minimum of 200 words (excluding spaces). This threshold was set to reduce the likelihood of including spam or overly brief comments that lacked sufficient evaluative content. Preference was given to the most recent reviews to capture up-to-date evaluative patterns. The manual selection also allowed for balance in terms of length and richness of attitudinal expressions across the dataset. To enhance the reliability of the coding process, inter-rater reliability was taken into account during the identification of attitudinal resources. The coding framework, derived from SFL, was first piloted on a small subset of reviews to refine the coding scheme. Two independent raters (including the researcher) then coded a portion of the data, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. This process ensured consistency and minimized subjectivity in the analysis.

3.3. Third Stage
From the corpus, we proceeded to divide the sentences of English and Vietnamese discourse into clause simplexes. Separating sentences into clause simplexes is a technique in SFL, particularly in the analysis of Transitivity processes. Each clause simplex contains only one process. The discourse were converted into spreadsheets, then broken down into clauses for separate analysis. Next, we select the clause simplexes that belong to the Material process. The number of Material clauses in English corpus is 1,710 clauses and in Vietnamese corpus is 1,340 clauses.

3.4. Fourth Stage

From the collected quantitative data, the author conducted a comparison of Material process types in English and Vietnamese restaurant reviews. These quantitative results serve as a foundation for evaluating the image of the restaurant represented in the two languages through descriptive methods. After identifying the similarities and differences, the researcher made generalizations about evaluative discourse in the two languages, while discussing the possible reasons leading to those similarities and differences.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Base-line information

The research findings reveal that Material processes constitute the second-largest proportion in restaurant review discourse (812 clauses in English, accounting for 30% of all process types, and 732 clauses in Vietnamese, accounting for 34.7% of all process types), representing physical activities and demonstrating a tendency toward description and authentic event narration. At the core of Material processes is a system of verbs denoting physical activities that express goings-on, realizing sequences of events and social activities, thereby conveying content about reality as represented in the discourse. Therefore, to understand the expressive meaning of Material processes, beyond examining the class of verbs indicating physical activities, it is essential to situate them within clause structures to observe their relationships with other participants, particularly Actor, Goal, Range, Beneficiary and their relationship with Circumstances types. Table 2 below presents the frequency statistics for two subtypes of Material clauses (Doing and Happening) in English and Vietnamese discourse.

Table 2. Frequency of Material Doing and Happening clauses in English and Vietnamese discourse.

Language	Doing Clauses	Happening Clauses	Total
English	614 (75.6%)	198 (24.4%)	812 clauses
Vietnamese	606 (82.8%)	126 (17.2%)	732 clauses

From the analysis of restaurant reviews on TripAdvisor (United States and Vietnam), Material processes clearly dominate in both languages. The results demonstrate that both languages exhibit similar distributional patterns of Material clause types: more than three-quarters of all Material clauses involve an affected participant, while approximately ¼-⅓ lack a direct object. This suggests that in the context of restaurant reviews, writers in both English and Vietnamese predominantly describe actions with direct impact (e.g., servers serving dishes, customers experiencing services) rather than describing events that occur without reference to specific objects. The subtle difference lies in the fact that Vietnamese demonstrates a significantly higher proportion of Doing clauses (82.8%) compared to English (75.6%), a difference of 7.2 percentage points. Conversely, English employs notably more Happening clauses (24.4%) than Vietnamese (17.2%), representing a 7.2-point gap.

Regarding participants, in Material processes, the Actor is the primary participant and appears in almost all English clauses (99.4%) and most Vietnamese clauses (94.1%). This reflects the common structure: Material clauses typically have a subject as the agent performing the action (Win, 2024). However, the proportion of Actors is lower in Vietnamese and the Goal (affected participant) appears more frequently in Vietnamese (79.3%) compared to English (66.9%). The Recipient (entity receiving goods) is also higher in Vietnamese (19.4% compared to 11.1% in English), while the Client (beneficiary of services) is conversely much less common in

Vietnamese (1.3% compared to 5.9% in English). For example, in the data, the English clause [ENRRE 15.15]: "They even brought out a lovely chocolate dessert complete with a candle on top for our 30th anniversary" (Actor = They, Goal = a lovely chocolate dessert, Client = our 30th anniversary) demonstrates a multi-participant structure in English. Meanwhile, a similar Vietnamese example [VNRRE 11.5]: "Vì mình đặt bàn cho sinh nhật chồng mình" (Because I booked a table for my husband's birthday" (Actor = mình, Goal = bàn, Client = sinh nhật chồng mình) contains Actor and Client. This difference may also be attributed to Vietnamese using benefactive markers such as "cho" preceding the Client, while English typically employs the structure "to/for X" (e.g., for our anniversary).

In the following parts, we will analyze in detail each subtype of Material Doing and Happening clauses in both languages, accompanied by illustrative examples and contrastive comparisons, before relating these results to previous research on Material processes.

4.2. Doing Material processes

According to Halliday, Doing clauses indicate that the subject performs some physical action that may affect another entity. Doing clauses typically answer the question "What did X do?" (Hoang Van Van, 2002, p.162). These are clauses with an affected participant—that is, in addition to the Actor (person/entity performing the action), there is also a Goal (target or object of the action) in the clause structure.

Regarding similarities, in the corpus, Doing clause types in both languages constitute a dominant majority (more than 75% of total Material clauses in both languages—see Table 2). This reflects that restaurant reviews typically recount actions that reviewers performed or that restaurant staff performed toward some object (food, service, experience, etc.). The typical structure of Material Doing clauses in both English and Vietnamese consists of [Actor + Material Process + Goal], possibly accompanied by additional participants such as Beneficiary (Recipient, Client) or Circumstance elements (indicating time, location, manner, etc.).

Regarding differences, Vietnamese restaurant reviews tends to use more Doing clauses than English in comparable discourse contexts (82.3% vs. 75.6%). English restaurant reviews typically emphasizes the action performer (Actor) using personal pronouns ("We," "They,") or proper names ("Norma"), while Vietnamese may explicitly name organizations or departments ("Nhà hàng Hemispheres," "Đội ngũ nhân viên"). For example: "My young son and I went looking for some pasta" [ENRRE 01.2] (subject "My young son and I"—two people) compared with "Chúng tôi đã thử món sườn cừu nướng, một món đặc trưng của nhà hàng" [VNRRE 02.10] (We tried the grilled lamb ribs, a signature dish of the restaurant. (subject "Chúng tôi"— group of customers). Furthermore, English is flexible in placing the Goal after the verb: many English Doing clauses have explicit Goals ("take reservations," "ordered the meal"), while Vietnamese sometimes elides the Goal because the meaning is already obvious or to emphasize context.

Some illustrative examples of Material Doing processes in English and Vietnamese discourse are presented in Tables 3 and 4 below:

Table 3. Examples of Doing Material processes in English discourse.

ENRRE 02.15: *Norma doesn't take reservations.*		
Norma	*doesn't take*	*reservations*
Actor	Material process (Doing)	Goal

ENRRE 02.13: *The wines on offer touch all the bases.*		
The wines on offer	*touch*	*all the bases*
Actor	Material process (Doing)	Goal

ENRRE 03.5: *I have experienced all types of Italian food.*		
I	*have experienced*	*all types of Italian food*
Actor	Material process (Doing)	Goal

ENRRE 26.6: *The chocolate dessert brought tears to my eyes.*			
The chocolate dessert	*brought*	*tears*	*to my eyes*
Actor	Material process (Doing)	Goal	Recepient

ENRRE 15.15: *They even brought out a lovely chocolate dessert complete with a candle on top for our 30th Anniversary.*			
They	*even brought out*	*a lovely chocolate dessert complete with a candle on top*	*for our 30th Anniversary*
Actor	Material process (Doing)	Goal	Client

Table 4. Examples of Doing Material processes in Vietnamese discourse.

VNRRE 01.1: *Nhà hàng Hemispheres phục vụ thực đơn phong phú từ Bắc đến Nam bán cầu.*		
Nhà hàng Hemispheres (Hemispheres restaurant)	*phục vụ* (serves)	*thực đơn phong phú từ Bắc đến Nam bán cầu* (a diverse menu featuring dishes from both the Northern and Southern hemispheres.)
Actor	Material process (Doing)	Goal

VNRRE 01.4: *Đồ ăn được bày biện tinh tế.*		
Đồ ăn (The food)	*được bày biện* (was presented)	*tinh tế* (elegantly)
Actor	Material process (Doing)	Circumstance (Manner)

VNRRE 03.2: *Ánh sáng dịu nhẹ và âm nhạc nhẹ nhàng làm tăng thêm sự thoải mái.*		
Ánh sáng dịu nhẹ và âm nhạc nhẹ nhàng (Soft lighting and gentle music)	*làm tăng thêm* (enhance)	*sự thoải mái* (the feeling of relaxation)
Actor	Material process (Doing)	Circumstance (Manner)

VNRRE 20.18: *Còn tôi thì tự chọn cho mình dòng Pinot Noir từ vùng Burgundy.*				
Còn (As for me)	*Tôi* (I)	*thì tự chọn* (chose)	*cho mình* (for myself)	*dòng Pinot Noir từ vùng Burgundy* (a Pinot Noir from the Burgundy region)
Adjunct	Actor	Material process (Doing)	Recepient	Goal

VNRRE 29.6: *Cách bài trí mang lại cảm giác thoải mái và thư giãn cho cả những buổi hẹn hò lãng mạn lẫn gặp gỡ bạn bè, gia đình.*			
Cách bài trí (The décor)	*mang lại* (creates)	*cảm giác thoải mái và thư giãn*	*cho cả những buổi hẹn hò lãng mạn lẫn gặp gỡ bạn bè, gia đình.*

		(a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere)	*(for romantic dates as well as gatherings with friends and family)*
Actor	Material process (Doing)	Range	Client

In English, Doing clauses follow active or passive structures, including an Actor performing the action and a Goal as the affected object. For example, in English, the clause "Norma doesn't take reservations" [ENRRE 02.15] comprises Actor "Norma" performing the action "take" directed toward Goal "reservations." Additionally, English can use the passive voice while maintaining physical meaning; for example, "This was recommended as a family friendly restaurant" [ENRRE 01.1] is the passive form of a Doing clause.

In Vietnamese, the Doing clause structure is similar but with some differences. The Actor in Doing clauses is typically the restaurant, service staff, or customers performing actions. For example, "Nhà hàng Hemispheres phục vụ thực đơn phong phú từ Bắc đến Nam bán cầu" [VNRRE 01.1] (Hemispheres restaurant serves a diverse menu featuring dishes from both the Northern and Southern hemispheres) has Actor "Nhà hàng Hemispheres" and Goal "thực đơn phong phú"; or "Đội ngũ nhân viên phục vụ nhẹ nhàng, chu đáo" [VNRRE 01.3] has Actor "đội ngũ nhân viên", and Material Doing Process "phục vụ". In Vietnamese, common Doing verbs include "phục vụ" (serve), "chế biến" (prepare), "làm" (make), "thử" (try), "sắp xếp" (arrange), etc., corresponding to tangible actions.

The above examples also show that the actor in Doing Material process is not necessarily human—both English and Vietnamese allow inanimate entities (objects, spaces) to function as Actor in Material clauses, in order to express how one element influences another. Indeed, Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) point out that the Actor can be an abstract or inanimate entity, and the Goal can be a person or object depending on context. The above case illustrates how reviewers describe the restaurant environment (lighting, music) as impacting their own comfort—a mode of expression quite common in both languages.

A noteworthy point is the appearance of the Beneficiary (recipient of benefit) in Material Doing clauses in both languages. The Beneficiary can be identified by examining its position in the clause, following the Goal. In this case, it is realized by a preposition—typically "cho" (for), marking it either as a Recipient type of Beneficiary or as a Client type of Beneficiary (Duong Huu Bien, 2022). In English, the Beneficiary typically appears as an indirect object or prepositional phrase (e.g., "The chef recommended us a dish" or "The chef recommended a dish to us"—"to us" is the Beneficiary—the recipient of the recommendation). In Vietnamese, the Beneficiary is often expressed more explicitly through phrases such as "cho khách" (for guests), "cho chúng tôi" (for us). The Vietnamese corpus shows many clauses with the structure Actor + Process + Goal + Beneficiary, such as: "Nhà hàng Hemispheres phục vụ thực đơn phong phú cho khách." (Actor: nhà hàng Hemispheres; Process: phục vụ; Goal: thực đơn phong phú; Beneficiary/Recipient: khách). Interestingly, although the served object (menu) is stated as the Goal, the writer still adds the Beneficiary "khách" (guests) to clearly indicate the benefiting object of the serving action. In English, similar expressions ("serve a menu to customers") also exist, but reviewers sometimes omit the Beneficiary if the context is clear (e.g., "the restaurant serves a diverse menu"—implicitly understood as "to diners"). Based on the corpus, Vietnamese tends to explicitly mention the beneficiary more frequently, while English sometimes relies on context for inference.

Grammatically, both languages employ the passive voice in Material Doing clauses to emphasize the object or omit the agent. In the English corpus, approximately 114 out of 614 Doing clauses (≈18.6%) are expressed in passive form, for example: "This was recommended as a family friendly restaurant by a friend." Here the Goal "This" is promoted to subject position, while the Actor (the recommender—"a friend") is backgrounded. Similarly, Vietnamese also has approximately 102 out of 606 Material clauses (≈16.8%) in passive form, typically using structures with the word "được" (or contextual understanding of the passive). For example: "Đồ ăn được bày biện tinh tế." The Goal "đồ ăn" (food) stands as the subject, while the Actor (the person who arranged it) is not stated. Clearly, both English and Vietnamese in restaurant reviews tend to hide the agent in many situations—typically when the agent is already clear from context or when the writer wishes to emphasize the result of the action rather than who performed it. Although the expression of the passive differs, the nearly equivalent proportion of passive voice usage in both corpora demonstrates functional similarity: reviewers in both languages know how to choose active/passive forms to flexibly express Experiential meaning.

4.3. Happening Material processes

Material Happening processes answer the question: "What happened to the Actor?", consisting of clauses with only one participant—the Actor participating in the process, with no direct Goal accompanying it (Rubavathanan, 2021). In other words, these are actions that occur by themselves or events that happen without affecting other objects. These parameters are clearly observed in both languages.

In the corpus, Happening clause types constitute approximately ¼-⅓ of total Material clauses (198 English clauses and 126 Vietnamese clauses—see Table 2 above). This similar proportion shows that both languages have a moderate amount of contexts where writers describe actions occurring without requiring an object, such as movement, occurrence, appearance, or the inherent activities of an entity. The minimal difference is that English restaurant reviews uses more Happening clauses than Vietnamese ones.

Tables 5 and 6 below present some examples of Material Happening Processes in English and Vietnamese discourse.

Table 5. Examples of Material Happening Processes in English discourse.

ENRRE 06.21: *Unusual combinations of flavors somehow work — like the bacalao croquetas with orange aioli, baby squid with roasted cipollinis, sobresada with quince marmalade*			
Unusual combinations of flavors	*somehow*	*work*	*like the bacalao croquetas with orange aioli, baby squid with roasted cipollinis, sobresada with quince marmalade*
Actor	Circumstance (Manner)	Material process (Happening)	Circumstance (Matter)
ENRRE 11.4: *And our three-hour, top-shelf journey began.*			
And	*our three-hour, top-shelf journey*		*began*
Adjunct	Actor		Material process (Happening)
ENRRE 45.11: *Our pizzas arrived in about ten minutes!*			

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Our pizzas	*arrived*	*in about ten minutes*
Actor	Material process (Happening)	Circumstance (temporal extent)

ENRRE 48.13: *And the meal came out very quickly (Và món ăn đến rất nhanh.)*

And	*the meal*	*came out*	*very quickly*
Adjunct	Actor	Material process (Happening)	Circumstance (Manner)

Table 6. Examples of Material Happening Processes in Vietnamese discourse.

VNRRE 36.6: *Buổi hẹn hò của mình diễn ra trơn tru và lãng mạn nhất.*		
Buổi hẹn hò của mình (My date)	*diễn ra* (went)	*trơn tru và lãng mạn nhất* (incredibly smoothly and romantically)
Actor	Material process (Happening)	Circumstance (Manner)

VNRRV 29.7: *Quán ăn mình trong một con đường nhỏ dẫn lên lầu một.*			
Quán (The restaurant)	*ẩn mình* (is hidden away)	*trong một con đường nhỏ dẫn lên lầu một* (in a small alley leading up to the first floor)	
Actor	Material process (Happening)	Circumstance (Temporal location)	

VNRRV 41.4: *Cả quá khứ bỗng chốc ùa về.*		
Cả quá khứ (The whole past)	*bỗng chốc* (suddenly)	*ùa về* (came flooding back)
Actor	Circumstance (Manner)	Material process (Happening)

The above examples demonstrate that Material Happening clauses in restaurant review discourse are used in English and Vietnamese to describe actions/events occurring without a direct object. They typically serve the purpose of narrative progression or objectively reporting incidents and outcomes. The similarity in proportion and function of this clause type in both languages suggests that the genre characteristics of restaurant review discourse have a greater influence on the choice of expression than differences attributable to language systems. In other words, writers in both languages share similar needs in recounting actions (with or without objects) to convey experience; and they choose transitive or intransitive structures based on content situation rather than language.

Happening clauses typically belong to several main semantic types. First, Happening clauses include cases where an event occurs with a single participant. For example: "Khi mang món ra thì bất ngờ xảy ra sự cố." (Vietnamese) or "An unexpected issue occurred." (English). Here there is only an event occurring (an issue occurring), with no specific agent causing it in the clause structure. Many review clauses reflect objective experience through this type of structure, such as: "Xảy ra chút trục trặc với đơn hàng của chúng tôi." (a problem occurred, without clearly attributing who caused it). Overall, both languages use Material Happening clauses to describe incidents and events occurring objectively, typically to narrate experiences the writer encountered (e.g., food brought out slowly, booking problems, etc.) without necessarily specifying the agent. Second, some Happening clauses express states of movement or transformation of objects. In English, we see examples such as: "The prices went up

significantly." (Giá cả tăng lên đáng kể)—the rising action occurs with Actor being the prices, with no Goal being affected, while "went up" only indicates a change of state of the prices.

Although the frequency of Material Happening clauses in both corpora is similar (20-25%), we observe some minor differences in expression between English and Vietnamese. English uses more Happening clauses than Vietnamese. Vietnamese discourse tends to use quite a rich variety of verbs indicating movement or appearance to narrate experience. For instance, instead of always saying directly "tôi đi đâu" (I go to), Vietnamese writers may use structures like "có dịp đến…" (have the occasion to come to…), "ghé thăm…" (drop by…), "bước vào…" (step into…), "dừng chân tại…" (stop at…) to add nuance to expression. Meanwhile, English typically uses verbs directly such as "go, come, visit, arrive" with supplementary adverbs/circumstances, less frequently using morphological structures like "có dịp" (have the occasion).

Regarding Circumstances, Happening clauses in both languages very frequently accompany Circumstance of location (place) to specify the destination or position where the action occurs. Examples include phrases like "đến nhà hàng X" (to restaurant X), "về nhà" (back home) (Vietnamese) or "back to the hotel," "at this place" (English) common in the data. On the other hand, Circumstance of time also frequently appears to modify the action, for example "cuối tuần" (weekend), "lần đầu tiên" (first time), "sau đó" (after that) (Vietnamese) and "last weekend," "for the first time," "after that" (English). There is no indication of clear differences in the frequency of circumstance usage between the two languages in Happening clauses—both exploit circumstances to clarify the context for the happening being discussed.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Comparison to related studies

The results of our analysis of Material clauses in restaurant review discourse generally align with previous research findings regarding Transitivity processes in language describing experience. Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) emphasize that Material processes are the most common type for humans to express action-oriented, dynamic real-world experiences. Indeed, many discourse studies within the SFL framework show that Material clauses typically occupy the highest proportion in narrative or event-descriptive texts. For example, in a study of English-Vietnamese bilingual advertising, Nguyen Thanh Duong (2022) found that Material processes were the most frequently used type in both English and Vietnamese advertisements, accounting for approximately 45% of all processes in the corpus. This is explained by the fact that advertising typically focuses on actions (emphasizing what the product/service can do for customers). Similarly, in the field of legal texts, Nguyen Thi Nhat Linh (2021), when analyzing Vietnamese economic contracts, reported that Material processes accounted for the highest proportion (~35%) compared to other processes in contracts. Although contracts represent a different language register, the fact that Material processes comprise over one-third of total processes demonstrates universality: when people communicate experience (whether service experiences or legal agreements), they tend to express it in the form of concrete actions and events.

Specifically regarding the distribution of Material Doing and Happening clauses, our results show that approximately three-quarters of Material clauses belong to the Doing subtype—a figure that corresponds with descriptions in functional grammar literature. Like Mahdi's (2014) Besemah language study, our research confirms Material processes as prominent in discourse,

with similar participant configurations (Actor, Goal, Beneficiary). However, our proportions differ markedly from Daulay's literary analysis (2020), where Material processes dominated overwhelmingly; in restaurant reviews, they constitute only 30-34.7% of total processes, reflecting genre-specific demands that balance action description with evaluation. Our study most closely aligns methodologically with Vuong Thi Hoan's (2018) English-Vietnamese contrastive approach, though examining evaluative rather than technical discourse. The finding that Vietnamese favors Doing clauses (82.8%) over English (75.6%) validates Hoang Van Van's (2005) theoretical framework, which identified Vietnamese's preference for explicit Actor-Goal transitivity configurations. This 7.2-percentage-point difference empirically confirms his assertion that Vietnamese Material processes tend toward higher Transitivity, while our data on English's greater use of Happening clauses (24.4% vs. 17.2%) extends his monolingual description to cross-linguistic comparison, demonstrating how typological differences—topic-prominence versus subject-prominence—systematically influence Material process realization even within constrained genre conventions.

In summary, our analysis of Material clauses in restaurant review discourse has demonstrated many fundamental similarities between English and Vietnamese in the selection and use of Material processes, while illuminating subtle differences. These results are not only consistent with classical SFL theory (Halliday, 2004; Thompson, 2014) but also reflect general trends in recent SFL application studies across various discourse types: people in different languages, when describing actual experience, all prioritize using Material clauses to vividly convey the experiential meaning of their own experiences. In other words, the Transitivity system proves to be a useful tool for exploring commonalities and differences in meaning expression across languages, and through this study, we clearly see both the commonalities and distinctive features of English and Vietnamese in restaurant review discourse through Material clauses.

5.2. Interpretation of the differences

The finding that English restaurant reviews contain fewer Doing clauses but more Happening clauses compared to Vietnamese reviews can be interpreted through several linguistic and cultural-pragmatic perspectives, supported by cross-linguistic research. First, the higher proportion of Happening clauses in English may reflect a stronger tendency toward agent defocusing and impersonalization in English discourse. According to Shibatani (1985), English exhibits a greater preference for agentless constructions and intransitive patterns when describing events, particularly in formal or evaluative contexts. This allows writers to present experiences as spontaneous occurrences rather than deliberate actions, which can soften criticism or create objectivity. Thompson (2014) notes that English speakers frequently employ intransitive constructions to "background the agent" and foreground the event itself, a strategy commonly used in evaluative discourse to maintain politeness. In restaurant reviews, English writers may prefer constructions like "The problem occurred" (Happening) over "The staff caused the problem" (Doing) to avoid direct blame attribution.

Second, the higher frequency of Doing clauses in Vietnamese can be explained by its topic-prominent linguistic structure. As Li and Thompson (1976) establish in their seminal work on topic-prominence, topic-prominent languages like Vietnamese organize information around topics rather than grammatical subjects, which facilitates more explicit participant mention when contextually relevant. Cao Xuan Hao (1991, 2004) demonstrates that Vietnamese discourse tends to maintain explicit reference to agents when describing actions that affect entities, even when the agent might be recoverable from context. This contrasts with English's

subject-prominent structure, which more readily allows subject ellipsis through grammatical mechanisms like passive voice or unaccusative constructions.

Third, cross-linguistic research on ergativity reveals that languages differ in their preferred transitivity patterns for encoding similar experiential content. DeLancey (1984) and Hopper and Thompson (1980) argue that high Transitivity (characterized by Doing clauses with clear Actor-Goal relationships) correlates with cultural emphases on agency and causation. Vietnamese, influenced by Chinese grammatical patterns, shows what Bisang (1996) terms "high transitivity preference" in discourse, meaning speakers tend to encode events with explicit agents and affected participants. English, by contrast, shows greater flexibility in "detransitivizing" events through middle voice constructions and unaccusative verbs (Levin & Rappaport Hovav, 1995).

6. CONCLUSION
6.1. Concluding remarks
This study demonstrates that while English and Vietnamese employ different grammatical systems—subject-prominence versus topic-prominence, morphological voice versus pragmatic voice—the functional demands of restaurant review discourse drive both languages toward remarkably similar Material process distributions. The devil, however, lies in the details: systematic differences in participant realization patterns reflect deep typological characteristics that persist even when genre conventions align surface-level proportions. By revealing both the universal constraints of genre and the persistent influence of language-specific grammars, this research contributes to our understanding of how meaning-making operates at the intersection of system and use, offering both theoretical insights for SFL and practical guidance for cross-cultural communication in an increasingly globalized world.

The findings of this study reveal both significant similarities and subtle differences in how Material processes are realized in English and Vietnamese restaurant review discourse. These results offer important insights into the interplay between language-specific grammatical systems and genre-specific communicative demands.

6.2. Theoretical implications
Our findings validate Hoang Van Van's (2005) theoretical framework for Vietnamese Material processes while demonstrating its applicability to authentic discourse data. The recognition criteria he proposed—participant number and nature, co-occurrence with directional verbs, and diagnostic probing—proved robust in identifying material processes across our corpus. Moreover, our study extends his monolingual descriptive work by providing the first systematic comparison of how English and Vietnamese deploy Material processes in parallel discourse contexts.

The study also confirms Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004, 2014) assertion that Material processes can accommodate both concrete and abstract Actors, as evidenced by our examples where inanimate entities (lighting, music, ambiance) function as Actors affecting Goal participants. This flexibility appears universal across both languages, suggesting that the semantic category of Material process transcends specific lexicogrammatical realizations. However, our data also reveal that the frequency with which each language exploits these possibilities varies—Vietnamese more readily specifies human agents and affected objects,

while English more frequently backgrounds agency through happening clauses and middle voice constructions.

5.3. Practical implications

The identified patterns have practical implications for translation, language teaching, and cross-cultural communication in the hospitality industry. Translators working with restaurant reviews should recognize that while Doing/Happening proportions remain stable across languages, participant realization strategies differ systematically. A Vietnamese review that omits the Actor ("Được phục vụ nhanh chóng") should generally be rendered in English with explicit subject ("We were served quickly" or "The staff served us quickly"), reflecting English's subject-prominence requirement.

For language learners, understanding these patterns can improve their production of natural-sounding evaluative discourse. Vietnamese learners of English should be made aware that English reviews strategically employ Happening clauses and passive voice to create objectivity and mitigate criticism—strategies less grammaticalized in Vietnamese. Conversely, English speakers learning Vietnamese should recognize that explicit Goal and Beneficiary marking, even when seemingly redundant, reflects Vietnamese discourse norms and enhances clarity in topic-prominent structures.

6.4. Limitations and future directions

Several limitations merit acknowledgment. First, our corpus draws exclusively from TripAdvisor reviews, which may not represent the full range of restaurant review registers (professional critics, food blogs, social media posts). Second, while our sample size is substantial, expanding the corpus across different restaurant types, price points, and regional varieties would strengthen generalizability. Third, our analysis focused on Material processes alone; a comprehensive understanding of restaurant review discourse would require examining how Material processes interact with mental, relational, and verbal processes in constructing evaluative meaning.

Future research might productively explore several directions: (1) investigating whether the genre-driven convergence observed here extends to other evaluative genres (hotel reviews, product reviews, film criticism); (2) examining how Material process choices correlate with review valence (positive vs. negative ratings) across languages; (3) analyzing the interface between Material processes and Appraisal resources in constructing persuasive evaluations; and (4) conducting experimental studies to determine whether these cross-linguistic patterns affect reader comprehension and purchasing decisions.

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