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The text of the Bayeux Tapestry

Propaganda in the 11th century. A linguistic note

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The Bayeux Tapestry, which strictly speaking is not a tapestry at all but a piece of embroidery, was produced in the late 11th century, probably commissioned by Odo, bishop of Bayeux, William the Conqueror's half-brother. Its objective is to support William's invasion and conquest of England. It can thus be seen as a piece of 11th century propaganda. It tells the story of Harold's oath to support William's claims to the English crown, his subsequent acceptance of the crown himself, followed by William's invasion of England and Harold's death at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The images in the Tapestry are accompanied by a text in Latin. This paper analyses the transitivity of those clauses in this text where Harold and William occur. This shows how both of these protagonists are represented through the transitivity selections of the text. While both occur as Actor to the same extent, Harold functions as Affected much more frequently than William (including ultimately, getting killed!). In addition, William functions as Sayer more frequently than Harold, and usually with verbs that indicate his authority. Thus William is painted as an effective, authoritative ruler. Thus the text of the tapestry underlines the power of William following his conquest and enhances the empowerment which success in battle bestowed on him.

Keywords: Bayeux Tapestry, propaganda, systemic functional linguistics, transitivity

1. Introduction: Partly personal

Recently, on the way home from a weekend away, my wife and I passed close to the town of Bayeux. It was a place we had never visited, and so we decided to stop for a few hours to see something of the town and, of course, the famous tapestry.

The Bayeux Tapestry is, in fact, not a tapestry at all, but a piece of embroidery. It is 68.5 metres long, and 50 centimetres wide. Originally it was even longer, but

the end has been lost and destroyed. The tapestry includes a text in Latin. This can be seen in Figure 1, where the Latin text runs along just below the upper frieze.



Figure 1. Beginning of the bayeux tapestry

It is not known who commissioned it, though it is suggested that it was Odo, who was bishop of Bayeux and a half-brother of Duke William. Nor do we know where it was made, though some think that it comes from the south-east of England.

The story as told by the images of the Bayeux Tapestry runs as follows: Harold left the court of King Edward in England, and set sail for Normandy on some mission, the nature of which remains a mystery (see van Kempen 2009, 2016). He seems to have been blown off course, since he landed in hostile territory. There he was taken prisoner by Count Guy. William, Duke of Normandy, persuaded Guy to hand over his prisoner, and William then took Harold on a military expedition against Conan II, Duke of Brittany. As they were passing near Mont Saint Michel, Harold saved two soldiers from the quicksands. Conan surrendered at the town of Dinan. William then gave Harold a gift of arms and armour, and subsequently Harold took his ill-fated oath to William. Harold then returned to England. The old King Edward died, and Harold was offered, and accepted, the crown of England. This news got back to William, who promptly built a fleet and invaded England. There was a long and bloody battle (at Hastings), in which Harold was killed, at which point the English fled. What the tapestry said happened after this we do not know, as this is the part that is missing.

This brought back memories of what I was told at primary school, probably about 1950. According to what I remember, I was told the relics on which Harold took his oath were hidden so that he was unaware that, rather than a simple promise, what he was making was a solemn oath. In other words he had been tricked. It is probable that my memory is not too defective, since I found this version on the website of Normandy Then and Now.

On receiving arms and armour from William, Harold thought he was being honoured for heroics in the Brittany campaign but William [had] apparently hidden some choice religious relics under a cloth, making Harold's "thanks"

a rather more serious “fealty” oath of allegiance. To his horror Harold had proclaimed William his lord and by now Harold was well aware of William’s ambition for the English throne.

Harold could later swear the oath was made under duress making it invalid, but the damage would go down in history and help William secure the Pope (and so God’s) support for his campaign in 1066.

(<https://www.normandythenandnow.com/when-harold-met-william-in-1064/>)

I was struck by the fact that the tapestry seems to be a piece of propaganda, and this is the view of some, including Noxon who says:

The Bayeux tapestry is a sponsored, propaganda work, designed for an illiterate mass audience. (Noxon 1968: 30)

It is seen as a work whose object is the promotion of William’s cause, but without antagonizing the former supporters of Harold. According to Thompson:

.. the tapestry explicitly avoids endorsing a view of history that supports one ethnic team over the other, seeking instead a narrative that emphasises their common interests. (Thompson 1999: 107)

If the tapestry is a biography of anyone, it is one of Harold. He is portrayed as heroic and worthy, but ultimately flawed, false and over-ambitious. (ibid. 119)

This is also the view of Noxon who remarks:

The dramatic narrative is designed to build up Duke William as the virtuous conquering hero supported by the true church and the only right and lawful successor to Edward the Confessor as King of England. It is also designed not to offend too greatly the still considerable body of Harold’s supporters, by making too obvious a villain out of him. He is presented as a brave warrior, only slightly less brave than William, but as a man with a fatal flaw in his character. (Noxon 1968: 30)

It is perhaps significant that Harold’s trip to Normandy is never mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Most studies of the Bayeux Tapestry treat it as imagery (Lemagnen 2015; Lewis 2007; Riss 2015), some comparing it to comic strips or cinema (Noxon 1968). Lepelley’s (1964) study is a rare exception but it deals only with proper names. My object in this research note is to consider the Latin text of the Bayeux Tapestry, to see how the two protagonists, Harold and William, are presented in the text. I shall therefore consider the transitivity of the clauses in which Harold and William appear.

2. Linguistic framework

The linguistic framework which I shall use is derived from systemic functional linguistics (hereafter SFL) (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014; Banks 2019). In this approach the clause is said to have three strands of meaning: ideational, interpersonal and textual. The ideational meaning or metafunction has as its main component the transitivity of the clause, where transitivity is conceived of as the relationship between a process, the participants in that process and, if there are any, the circumstances. The process is encoded by the verbal group. The approach provides for a number of process types, but only two of these are pertinent to this study. Material processes are actions or events of a physical nature. In (1), *dragged* encodes a Material Process.

- (1) Duke Harold dragged them from the quicksands.

Verbal processes are process of communication. In (2), *asks* encodes a Verbal Process.

- (2) Duke William asks Vital if he has seen Harold's army.

There are a number of types of participants that we need to consider. An Actor is the participant who causes a material process to occur. In (1), *Duke Harold* functions as Actor. The Affected (sometimes also called Goal or Patient) is the participant who is in some way modified by a material process. In (1), *them* functions as Affected. A Range functions like a participant rather than a Circumstance, but indicates the extent of the process, or where it takes place. In (3), *the river Couesnon* functions as Range.

- (3) They crossed the river Couesnon.

A Recipient is the participant who receives either a physical entity in a material process, or a piece of communication in a verbal process. In (4), *Harold* functions as Recipient in a material process, as does *Vital* in the verbal process in (2).

- (4) William gave Harold arms.

The Sayer is the person who communicates in a verbal process. In (2), *Duke William* functions as Sayer. The Verbiage is the content of the communication. In (2), *if he has seen Harold's army* functions as Verbiage.

There are three types of Circumstance that occur in the relevant clauses of the text. These are Place, Manner and Accompaniment. In (1), *from the quicksands* functions as a Circumstance of Place. In (5), *in a large ship* functions as a Circumstance of Manner.

- (5) Duke William crossed the sea in a large ship.

In (6), *in the company of Harold* functions as a Circumstance of Accompaniment.

(6) Duke William, in the company of Harold, came to his palace

It might be objected that this approach involves applying a framework developed principally for modern English to a different language from an earlier period. If the analysis was treating only lexis and structure, this might have some weight, but the analysis involved is basically semantic, and semantic categories are, in general, common. Halliday and Martin, while recognising that there is a great deal of variation between languages, point out that much of this variation is marginal.

Since we all live on the same planet, and since we all have the same brain capacities, all our languages share a great deal in common in the way experience is construed. But within these limits there is also considerable variation from one language to another ... Much of this variation, however, is on a small scale ...

(Halliday and Martin 1993: 8–9)

One might note that Cummings (2010) used the model to great effect in his analysis of Old English. Thus, for example, a physical action or event is encoded as a Material Process, whether it be in Old English, in medieval Latin or in Modern English, and the conscious instigator of such a process is the Actor in any of these languages.

Moreover, Halliday and Martin see medieval Latin as blending into the vernaculars of the time.

In western Europe, where Latin took over, it continued to evolve into medieval times; by then, however, while the outward form was still Latin, the underlying semantic styles were those of the next generation of spoken languages, Italian, Spanish, French, English, German and so on, and further developments, even if first realised in Latin, were more an extension of these languages than of Latin itself.

(Halliday and Martin 1993: 13)

Consequently, I consider the systemic functional approach as perfectly suitable for analysing the transitivity of this text.

3. Transitivity and text analysis in SFL

The analysis of transitivity in text has a long history in SFL and has frequently been used as a way of teasing out the meaning of the discourse. Probably the most well-known example of this is Halliday's analysis of transitivity in William Golding's *The Inheritors*, originally published in 1971, but probably more easily accessible as Halliday (1973) or Halliday (2002[1971]). In this study, Halliday

uses transitivity analysis to bring out the differing worldviews of Neanderthal men and homo sapiens. There must be innumerable exercises produced in the wake of Halliday's paper, such as my own early effort (Banks 1992). This type of analysis has been subsumed in the study of "verbal art", a phrase which has become inextricably linked to the name of Ruqaiya Hasan. In Hasan (1989), for example, she uses transitivity analysis in her study of Australian poet Les Murray's *Widower in the Country*. She would return to this analysis in later work (e.g. Hasan 2007). Miller (2019) charts the development of the study of verbal art in SFL, in particular Hasan's systemic socio-semantic stylistics, and contrasts it with other approaches to stylistics. Although there is a vast literature in the area of the systemic analysis of literary text, which would include, for example, Benson et al. (1995), Ji and Shen (2004) and Pagano and Lukin (2015), the same techniques have been applied in many other fields, including, for example, science (e.g. Martinez 2001; Banks 2008, 2017), the social sciences (e.g. Lewin et al. 2001), the media (e.g. Chen 2005), medicine (e.g. Karimi et al. 2018; Asp and de Villers 2019), mathematics (e.g. O'Halloran 2005) and politics (e.g. Banks 2021; Xiang 2022). However, to the best of my knowledge there are no linguistic studies of texts comparable, even remotely, to the historically important Latin text of the Bayeux Tapestry.

4. The text and its analysis

The text includes a number of words and phrases which are not clauses, but names of people or places which function as legends or labels, such as *Nuntii Willalmi* (William's messengers), *Edward Rex* (King Edward) and *Rednes* (Rennes). Since such segments are not clauses they do not exhibit transitivity.

Many clauses begin with the words *hic* or *ubi*, such as *Hic Harold mare navigavit* (Here Harold sailed across the sea) and *Ubi Harold et Wido parabolant* (Where Harold and Guy speak). In these clauses the words *hic* and *ubi* are there simply to link the text to the adjacent image and will be omitted from the analyses of the clauses.

Harold appears in 24 clauses, and William in 20, six of which are common, that is in which both of the protagonists are present.

5. Harold as Actor

Harold functions as Actor in eight clauses, which can be analysed as follows.

Harold Dux Anglorum et sui milites	equant	ad Bosham
Actor	Pro: material	Circ: place

Harold, Duke of the English and his soldiers ride to Bosham

Harold	mare	navigavit
Actor	Range	Pro: material

Harold sailed across the sea

velis vento plenis	venit	in terrā Widonis Comititis
Circ: manner	Actor / Pro: material	Circ: place

with the sails full of wind he came to the land of Count Guy

Harold Dux	trahebat	eos	de arena
Actor	Pro: material	Affected	Circ: place

Duke Harold dragged them from the quicksands

venerunt	ad Dol
Actor / Pro: material	Circ: place

They came to Dol

Harold Dux	reverses est	ad Anglicam terram
Actor	Pro: material	Circ: place

Duke Harold returned to England

il	venit	ad Edwardum regem
Actor	Pro: material	Circ: place

He came to King Edward

residet	Harold rex anglorum
Pro: material	Actor

Harold lives as King of the English

As can be seen, Harold rides to Bosham; he sails across the sea; he arrives in the country of Count Guy; he drags two soldiers from the quicksands; they arrive at Dol; he returns to England; he comes to see King Edward; and he reigns as king. It is striking that with a single exception, all of these clauses are intensive (as opposed to extensive). In other words, in seven of these clauses there is no Affected. Although, Harold is acting, he is acting only on himself; his actions are not those which have an effect on the world around him. The one exception to this is the clause where he saves the soldiers from the quicksands. So, although

he is represented as rarely having an effect on the outside world, in the one case where he does he is presented as a heroic figure.

6. William as Actor

William, like Harold, functions as Actor in eight clauses, which can be analysed as follows:

Dux Wilgelm	cum Haroldo	venit	ad Palatiū suū
Actor	Circ: accompaniment	Pro: material	Circ: place

Duke William, in the company of Harold, came to his palace

Willem Dux et exercitus eius	venerunt	ad Montē Michaelis
Actor	Pro: material	Circ: place

Duke William and his army came to Mont St. Michel

transierunt	flumen Cosnonis
Actor / Pro: material	Range

They crossed the river Couesnon

venerunt	ad Dol
Actor / Pro: material	Circ: place

They came to Dol

Willelm	dedit	Haroldo	arma
Actor	Pro: material	Recipient	Affected

William gave Harold arms

Willelm	venit	Bagias
Actor	Pro: material	Circ: place

William came to Bayeux

Willelm Dux	in magno navigio	mare	transivit
Actor	Circ: manner	Range	Pro: material

Duke William crossed the sea in a large ship

venit	ad Pevensæ
Actor: Pro: material	Circ: place

He came to Pevensey

As can be seen, William gets to his palace; he goes to Mont Saint Michel; they cross the river Couesnon; they get to Dol; he gives Harold arms; he gets to Bayeux; he crosses the sea; and finally he gets to Pevensey. As with Harold, seven of the eight clauses are intensive, where William acts, but without affecting the world around him. In only one of the clauses is there an Affected, and that is the clause where he gives Harold a gift of arms. So, in the single clause where he has an effect on the outside world, William is presented as being magnanimous and generous.

So, from the point of view of functioning as Actor, Harold and William are presented as being very similar. They each function as Actor to the same extent, and only in one case in a clause which includes an Affected. In these exceptional cases, Harold is presented as heroic and William as magnanimous.

7. Harold as Affected

Harold functions as Affected in five clauses which can be analysed as follows:

apprehendit	Wido	Haroldū
Pro: material	Actor	Affected

Guy captured Harold

duxit	eum	ad Belrem
Actor / Pro: material	Affected	Circ: place

He took him to Beaurain

ibi	eum	tenuit
Circ: place	Affected	Actor/ Pro: material

There he held him

Wido	adduxit	Haroldum	ad Wilgelmum Normanorum Ducem
Actor	Pro: material	Affected	Circ: place

Guy took Harold to William Duke of the Normans

Harold rex	interfectus est
Affected	Pro: material

King Harold was killed

In these clauses, Harold is captured; he is taken to Beaurain and held there as a prisoner; he is taken to William; and finally, perhaps the ultimate Affected, he gets killed. In contrast, William never functions as Affected. So while Harold is

presented as being subject to outside forces to a considerable extent, this is never true of William.

8. Harold as Sayer

Harold functions as Sayer in two clauses, of which the following are the analyses:

Harold et Wido	parabolant
Sayer	Pro: verbal

Harold and Guy talk

Harold	sacramentum	fecit	Willelmo Duci
Sayer	Verbiage	Pro: verbal	Recipient

Harold took an oath to Duke William

These are the only two clauses in which Harold functions as Sayer. In the first Harold talks to Guy. This clause is fairly neutral, but in the second we have Harold making his infamous oath to William.

Some readers familiar with SFL might have analysed these as cases of Behavioural process. However, I consider the category of behavioural process to be incoherent. The reasons for this are explained in detail in Banks (2016).

9. William as Sayer

William functions as Sayer in four clauses, of which the following are the analyses:

Willelm Dux	jussit	naves edificare
Sayer	Pro: verbal	Verbiage

Duke William ordered the building of ships

iste	jussit	ut foderetur castellum at Hestenga ceastra
Sayer	Pro: verbal	Verbiage

He ordered a fort to be built at Hastings camp

Willelm dux	interrogat	Vital	si vidisset exercitū Haroldi
Sayer	Pro: verbal	Recipient	Verbiage

Duke William asks Vital if he has seen Harold's army

Willelm dux	alloquitur	suis militibus	ut prepararent et viriliter
Sayer	Pro: verbal	Recipient	Verbiage

Duke William incites his troops to prepare in manly fashion

So William functions as Sayer rather more frequently than Harold. However, it is the nature of the verbal processes rather than their frequency which is striking. William orders the building of ships and the construction of a fort; he asks about Harold's army; and he harangues his troops before battle. At least three of these four mark William out as a leader. Ordering the building of ships and a fort, and addressing his troops before battle, are things which only a leader with established authority can do. So these verbal processes paint Harold as someone willing to take an oath which he would not keep, thus painting him as faithless, while William is presented as an authoritative leader of men, in a position to give orders.

10. Harold as Recipient

Harold functions as Recipient in three clauses of which the following are the analyses:

Willelm	dedit	Haroldo	arma
Actor	Pro: material	Recipient	Affected

William gave Harold arms

dederunt	Haroldo	coronā regis
Actor / Pro: material	Recipient	Affected

They gave Harold the King's crown

Iste	nuntiat	Haroldum regē	de exercitu Willelmi ducis
Sayer	Pro: verbal	Recipient	Verbiage

He informs King Harold about Duke William's army

Harold is given arms, and the gift comes from William; he is also given the crown of England; and he gets information about William's army.

11. William as Recipient

William functions as Recipient in two clauses. The following are the analyses:

Harold	sacramentum	fecit	Willelmo Duci
Sayer	verbiage	Pro: verbal	Recipient

Harold took an oath to Duke William

nuntiatum est	Willelmo	de Harold
Pro: verbal	Recipient	Verbiage

William is informed about Harold

William receives Harold's oath, and he is informed about Harold. While in two cases out of three, Harold receives physical items, in one case from William himself, William only receives discourse, and one of the two cases is Harold's infamous oath.

12. Other occurrences

Otherwise, Harold functions twice within an Affected, for example as Qualifier in a nominal group, twice within the Verbiage, and twice within Circumstances, in one case of Cause and in another of Accompaniment.

William appears as Qualifier within a nominal group functioning as Actor on two occasions, once within the Verbiage, and on three occasions within Circumstances of place.

13. Clauses common to Harold and William

Although we have seen above all the clauses where Harold and William appear, it is worth looking again briefly at those clauses where they both appear. This is the case in six clauses. The first occurs where Harold is taken as a prisoner to William, where Harold functions as Affected, and William appears within the Circumstances of place (the analysis is repeated for convenience with additional highlighting).

Wido	adduxit	Haroldum	ad Wilgelmum Normanorum Ducem
Actor	Pro: material	Affected	Circ: place

Guy took Harold to William Duke of the Normans

The second is where Harold accompanies William to his palace. Here William functions as Actor and Harold appears within the circumstances of accompaniment.

Dux Wilgelm	cum Haroldo	venit	ad Palatiū suū
Actor	Circ: accompaniment	Pro: material	Circ: place

Duke William, in the company of Harold, came to his palace

In the third, William gives Harold arms. William here functions as Actor and Harold as Recipient.

Willelm	dedit	Haroldo	arma
Actor	Pro: material	Recipient	Affected

William gave Harold arms

The fourth case is where Harold swears his oath to William, so Harold functions as Sayer, while William is the Recipient.

Harold	sacramentum	fecit	Willelmo Duci
Sayer	Verbiage	Pro: verbal	Recipient

Harold took an oath to Duke William

In the fifth case William asks for information about Harold's army. William functions as Sayer, and Harold appears as the qualifier of a nominal group within the verbiage.

Willelm dux	interrogat	Vital	si vidisset exercitū Haroldi
Sayer	Pro: verbal	Recipient	Verbiage

Duke William asks Vital if he has seen Harold's army

Finally, William is told about Harold. William functions as recipient, while Harold is within the verbiage.

nuntiatum est	Willelmo	de Harold
Pro: verbal	Recipient	Verbiage

William is informed about Harold

Overall, in these clauses where they both appear, William functions twice as Actor, twice as Recipient and once as Sayer, and appears once within Circumstances of place. Harold in these clauses is never Actor, but functions once as Affected, once as Recipient and once as Sayer, and appears twice within the Verbiage. On balance it would seem that William is presented in these clauses as the superior character.

14. Conclusions

In terms of the function of Actor, the text treats the two protagonists in a fairly even way. They both function as Actor on eight occasions, but in seven cases the clauses are intensive, so there is no Affected. In the single case for each of them where the clause is extensive, hence with an Affected, Harold is shown to be heroic and William magnanimous and generous.

When it comes to the function of Affected, Harold functions as Affected on five occasions, so he is presented as being subject to external forces, including the ultimate indignity of getting killed in battle (see Figure 2). In contrast, William never functions as Affected, and so is never shown as being subject to outside forces.



Figure 2. Beginning of the Bayeux Tapestry

Harold functions as Sayer on two occasions and William on four. The nature of the verbal processes of which William is the Sayer points him out as an authoritative leader, while one of the verbal processes of which Harold is the Sayer is his ill-fated oath of fealty to William. As Recipient, Harold is given things, while William is given information.

Hence the overall picture of these two characters presented by the Latin text of the Bayeux Tapestry is that Harold is worthy and valorous; he showed his bravery in saving some soldiers from the quicksands at Mont Saint Michel. On the other hand, he has a seriously flawed character, and his oath, which he did not keep, is the prime example. William is shown to be a superior character, and a natural leader. He is generous; he speaks with authority giving orders and

inciting his troops before battle; he is the one to whom information is brought. So although Harold has certain qualities, William is clearly the superior of the two.


This is consistent with the view, based on studies of the imagery, that the Bayeux Tapestry is a work of propaganda intended to support William's cause, while at the same time avoiding antagonizing to any great extent the former supporters of Harold. In some senses this may seem a meagre result, but to the best of my knowledge, this is the first attempt to provide a linguistic analysis of the Latin text of the Bayeux Tapestry. From that point of view, the results provided here are of interest.









This fairly short, and I hope unpretentious, note has looked at just one linguistic aspect of this text, that of transitivity. There are many other things that could have been done, such as interpersonal aspects, particularly those that would be brought out by Appraisal; or looking at aspects of the textual metafunction such as the thematic structure; and since the text accompanies a visual artwork (and most people would probably think of the text as the minor part of that association), it would be possible to consider the link between text and image in a multimodal analysis. In fact the list of possibilities is extensive, if not endless. All of these possibilities could produce fruitful results but would take us far beyond the scope of this paper. Hence, they must await further studies, and if this inspires others to take up this line of enquiry, then all the better.





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