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Exploring the Experiential Meanings of the COVID-19 Survivors' Expressions

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Abstract

Language transforms experience into meaning. Grammar, which can be metaphorically construed as its powerhouse, enables such a transformation. One of the linguistic approaches utilised to understand the linkage between the semiotic and material world is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL argues that the experiential meaning of a clause can be investigated through its transitivity structures in terms of Process, Participant, and Circumstance. This study carries out a transitivity analysis of expressions shared by COVID-19 survivors from different parts of the world in an attempt to learn how they construe their experience of illness. The data were obtained from online newspapers published in different countries and conveniently developed into a corpus from which COVID-19 survivors' expressions were extracted. All texts under examination were reported in English regardless of their original language. This study examines the survivors' direct expressions through their transitivity structures using the SFL framework. The results show that these individuals frequently used relational and abstract material Processes in describing their illness, meaning that they tended to express their physical or psychological experiences metaphorically as beings and actions. This suggests that they abstractly construe their experiences with this viral disease. Constructing experiences abstractly is likely driven by the need to distance themselves from experience as a way of coping with an event perceived as potentially life-threatening.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing this article (the end of 2021), the world was still facing the tragic reality caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Johns Hopkins University's website reported that 234,257,265 people contracted the virus, and 4,791,475 of them lost their lives (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2021). One year later, in the middle of September 2022, CNN reported that WHO (World Health Organization) released an update stating that COVID-19 cases continued to decline and the end of the pandemic was just around the corner (Thomas, 2022). In general, while survivors of the virus significantly outnumber the casualties, the number of fatalities remains concerning. Considering the suffering caused by the virus, it is necessary to look at it from various perspectives for explanatory purposes. The present study aims to examine the pandemic from a linguistic angle.

A number of studies have examined and suggested measures against COVID-19 from various disciplines in the medical and educational domains (e.g., Danese et al., 2020; Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2020). There is also research that addresses the issue from a linguistic perspective. Such studies are, however, few in number, likely because the COVID-19 outbreak represents a new and ongoing reality. Luporini (2021) examines how journalists of China Daily and The Wall Street Journal wrote their headlines and subheadings concerning the COVID-19 outbreak. Alkhawaldeh (2021) studies the linguistic strategies the Jordanian government employed to ensure public compliance and cooperation regarding their COVID-19 policies. Furthermore, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Al-Mwzaiji (2021) examines speeches by American and Chinese politicians and diplomats debating the origin of the coronavirus. More recently, Mo and Heng (2022) study the anti-pandemic slogans in China, focusing on the types of pragmatic presuppositions of these slogans and their functions.

The present study applies the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach to investigate the experiential meaning of expressions used by COVID-19 survivors. In particular, these expressions constitute descriptions of what they experienced during and after recovering from the coronavirus. The study aims to provide refined descriptions of the coronavirus experience, in the hope that what survivors have expressed about their experience can contribute to public narrative and collective memory. These experiences may also add to public understanding of the magnitude of the suffering caused by this novel virus. Also, members of the public may become more vigilant in their approach to infectious diseases if they are more aware of what others have experienced. Such awareness would be instrumental in efforts to address outbreaks of COVID-19 or other emergent diseases in the future.

While SFL has been fruitfully applied in examining political texts (Fowler, 1995; Lukin, 2019; O'Grady, 2019), such is not the case in texts related to human suffering. Halliday (1998) has written a paper discussing the grammar of pain expressions in English. He explains how pain is expressed through grammar, namely, as Thing ('I have a headache'), Process ('My knee hurts' or 'is hurting'), and Quality ('My throat is sore'). Each meaning category corresponds to a noun, verb, and adjective,

respectively. [Hori \(2006\)](#) conducted a study on pain expressions in Japanese. Like [Halliday \(1998\)](#), he also finds that Japanese speakers categorize pain as Thing, Process, and Quality. While [Halliday \(1998\)](#) and [Hori \(2006\)](#) analyse pain expressions in the context of common symptomology (such as fever, sore throat, headache, etc.), the present study considers the context of a pandemic (COVID-19). Such a contextual difference can be regarded as the novelty of this study.

This study poses two research questions:

1. What are the transitivity systems of the COVID-19 survivors' expressions?
2. What can these transitivity systems inform us about how the survivors construe their experiences with COVID-19?

To address these questions, the study begins by looking at the grammar of expressions of suffering through their transitivity structures before continuing with an analysis of the semantics of the COVID-19 survivors' expressions as a lens to observe how they construe their experiences. Our study examines the expressions shared by the 'true' experiencers of the COVID-19 outbreak. This is different from studies by [Alkhawaldeh \(2021\)](#), [Al-Mwzaiji \(2021\)](#), and [Luporini \(2021\)](#). While these studies examine the COVID-19 pandemic by looking at texts used by the government and media, our study focuses on the expressions (texts) of individuals who suffered from COVID-19. This study expands the literature of discourse or text analysis using the SFL framework and add to public narrative and collective memory in terms of how humans describe their agonising experiences. In what follows, we provide further information about SFL in general and experiential meaning in particular.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Experiential Meanings

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) introduces theories of meaning and grammar. Both are closely related in that the grammar helps to reveal the meaning. In SFL, language construes experience, enacts social relationships, and creates discourse. These three functions (so-called metafunctions) occur simultaneously in a clause and correspond to ideational (further divided into experiential and logical) meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning, respectively (see [Halliday, 1978](#); [Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014](#); [Thompson, 2014](#)). The experiential meaning is analysed through its transitivity structure, interpersonal meaning is examined through its mood structure, and textual meaning is investigated through its thematic structure. This study focuses on experiential meanings or metafunction; therefore, references to the other metafunctions are only made if necessary. For more detailed explanations of the three metafunctions, see, for example, [Eggins \(2004\)](#) and [Halliday and Matthiessen \(2014\)](#).

Through experiential meanings, we specifically attempt to pursue the linkage between the semiotic and material world. Such a linkage departs from the assumption that speakers use language as an instrument to express their construal or point of view of the real world. Every time a speaker speaks, s/he expresses his/her understanding of what is happening in his/her surroundings. However, it has to be kept in mind that, in this sense, when reality is expressed through language, it becomes virtual. This means that reality is mediated through meaning (one of the resources of language). In other

words, our understanding and construal of reality, so-called knowledge, is virtual (Halliday, 1998). Meaning or knowledge can be understood as symbolic or representational experience if the term 'experience' is to be used at all. In this sense, meaning is understood as a theory about the human experience of reality (Webster, 2015).

Language is responsible for transforming experience into meaning. Halliday (1998) says that the property of the language that makes this transformation of material into a semiotic world is its grammar, or lexicogrammar, to be more exact. In SFL, grammar is seen as the powerhouse of language (Halliday, 1998; Webster, 2015). With the lexis of a language, grammar provides language speakers with endless resources in any act of meaning or attempt to make sense of the world. Such unlimited language resources are why language is seen as paradigmatic or ideological.

2.2 Transitivity Structure

As mentioned above, this study limits itself to examining the experiential meaning of the sampled expressions. These experiential meanings were examined by analysing the transitivity structures of the survivors' expressions. Webster (2015, p. 15) states that speakers or writers "talk about their experience of the world in terms of processes, along with those participants and circumstances that accompany them". In SFL, these three constituents (Process, Participant, Circumstance) symbolize an experience—where indeed the functional labels in SFL are capitalised to avoid confusion when they are used as common terms). Each corresponds to a grammatical class: Processes are typically realized by verbs, Participants by nouns, and Circumstances by adjuncts. For example, in the event of driving, as in 'John drove Jane home', the event involves a Process ('drove'), two Participants ('John and Jane'), and a certain Circumstance ('home'). Participants and Processes occur compulsorily, while Circumstance does not. Naturally, the absence or presence of these elements affects the information entirety in a clause. More explanation about the concept of transitivity structure and its utilization to reveal experiential meanings are as elaborated below.

SFL scholars have offered explanations of how transitivity structure works (e.g., Bloor & Bloor, 2014; Eggins, 2004; Fontaine, 2013; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 2014). Processes are divided into major and minor types. The major types include material, mental, and relational Processes, while the minor ones include behavioural, verbal, and existential Processes. Halliday (1994) provides a graphic that can help us understand the relations among these types of Processes. His graphic is adapted by Fontaine (2013) from which Figure 1 is slightly adapted.

Figure 1 includes the six types of Process (realized by a verb in the clause). The three major types are separated from each other by one minor type. The position of each Process is meaningful. One type of Process is semantically close to the other type of Process placed around it. For example, the material Process is semantically closer to the behavioural and existential Processes than the other Processes. While such categorizations can be made, they are not meant to offer clear-cut distinctions (Fontaine, 2013). This indeterminacy rightly reflects the complexity of human experience reflected through language.

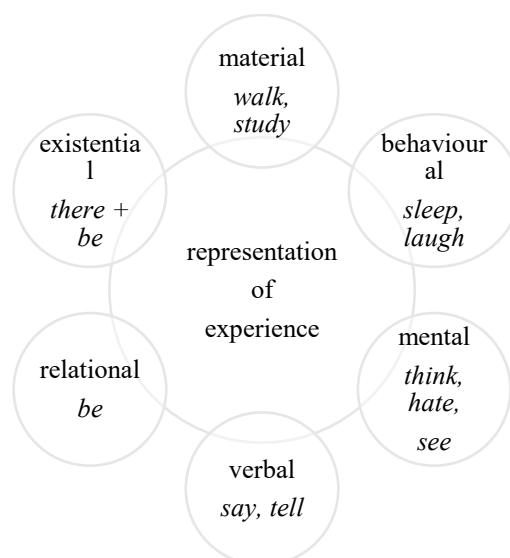


Figure 1. Process types.

As we move clockwise from the material, mental to relational Process, we might realize that Process moves from a more tangible to a less tangible type of function. The idea of tangibility can be confronted with the nature of its Participants. Material and mental Processes involve specific actions or events. However, while the former implicates objective events that can change the physical world, the latter engages in the subjective, inner world. Unlike material and mental Processes, a relational Process does not depict actions or events but merely states of being. In other words, while the Participants in material and mental Processes are related externally or internally, “relational Processes relate two participating entities in a more abstract way” (Fontaine, 2013, p. 75).

The presence or absence of a Participant(s) is important as it may help denote the degree of abstractness of a proposition or expression. For instance, a material Process, as in ‘It’s raining’, has no Participant at all, and an existential Process, as in ‘There is a virus’, has a Participant (‘virus’). For this, ‘There is a virus’ is arguably more concrete as a proposition than ‘It’s raining’. In the former, there is an inclusion of a Participant (Existent), and we know that it exists or is located somewhere (realised by ‘is’ as the existential Process), while in the latter we are only given information about the Process (‘raining’). However, it should be noted that while the English dummy subject ‘it’ in ‘It’s raining’ does not refer to a particular participant, it suggests a ‘contextual’ participant; it might be understood as representing the whole situation, implying the abstractness of expressions.

As for the Participants, SFL further refines their functional labels into more specific ones. A Participant can be an Actor, Sayer, Goal, Carrier, Behavior, Attribute, Beneficiary, Phenomenon, and so on. As a rule of thumb, each Process, being the essential element of a clause, type involves a specific Participant type (Butt et al., 2000). The relationship between Process type and Participant is shown in Table 1.

The examples in Table 2 are intended to illustrate how a different Process (Pr) type takes different Participants as a company in terms of the transitivity system. This system of transitivity enables us to look at the grammar of each clause that in turn informs its experiential meaning (Eggins, 2004). For a more complete explanation,

refer to, for example, [Halliday and Matthiessen \(2014\)](#). In Table 2, the Processes and Participants are given in the examples.

Table 1. Relationship between Process and Participant.

Process	Meaning	Participant
Material	doing, happening	Actor-Goal
Mental	feeling, thinking	Senser- Phenomenon
Relational	classifying, identifying	Carrier- Attribute Token-Value
Verbal	saying	Sayer-Verbiage
Behavioural	behaving	Behaver
Existential	being	Existent

Table 2. Process types and their examples.

Process type	Example
Material	I _[Actor] touched _[Pr:Material] death _[Goal]
Mental	John _[Senser] loves _[Pr:Mental] Jane _[Phenomenon]
Relational	My morale _[Carrier] is _[Pr:Relational/Intensive] rock bottom _[Attribute]
Verbal	He _[Sayer] told _[Pr:Verbal] them _[Receiver] a lie _[Verbiage]
Behavioural	I _[Behaver] couldn't sleep _[Pr:Behavioral]
Existential	There is _[Pr:Existential] some microscopic battle going on _[existent]

Like Process and Participant, Circumstance can be further refined into more specific functional terms. They include Circumstance of extent, location, manner, accompaniment, cause, matter, condition, direction, and role (see [Eggins, 2004](#); [Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014](#)).

3. METHOD

This study collected news stories related to COVID-19 survivors' experiences from eight online news platforms, including Vox, The Japan Times, Times Herald, BBC, Global News, Today, The Age, and The Australian published between April 19, 2020 and September 20, 2020. These sources were chosen as they included stories related to COVID-19 from many parts of the world. The selected news stories were then developed into a corpus ([de Beaugrande, 2001](#)). The articles ranged from 498 to 3481 words. In total, the corpus was 12.970 words long.

While all the collected texts were in English, it is uncertain whether some were originally in this language or were translated from other languages. Some survivors depicted in the news articles came from non-English speaking countries. The nations represented were the UK, South Korea, Canada, Italy, Spain, Iran, Nigeria, China, South Africa, France, Argentina, the USA, and Australia. Considering their origins, some of the collected expressions were likely translated from their original spoken language. Even though the translations of the texts matter because they may have been so domesticated ([Rafael, 2016](#); [Venuti, 2008](#)), this study took this for granted. More information is shown in Table 3.

As seen in Table 3, Vox had the longest article while The Age and The Australian were the two shortest. However, the articles from The Age and The Australian also included videos featuring patients sharing their experiences with the COVID-19 virus that were also selectively presented by the journalists in the article.

Table 3. Information of data source.

Source	Word Count	Retrieval Date
Global news	1619	April 19, 2020
BBC	1698	April 22, 2020
Times Herald	1902	May 24, 2020
Today	1272	May 29, 2020
Vox	3481	July 1, 2020
The Age	531	July 25, 2020
The Australian	498	August 10, 2020
The Japan Times	1969	September 20, 2020
Total	12970	

As is the nature of journalistic texts, the texts are composed of reports by the journalists/interviewers, long monologues and quotes (direct speech) from the survivors or others. Some survivors told quite a long story, while others were shorter. This resulted in an uneven number of expressions from each article. The texts were closely read to extract the direct speeches of the COVID-19 survivors. While the survivors spoke of varied information in the collected texts, only their utterances, written as monologues or quotes in the data, that were directly quoted in the data and that specifically described their experience of suffering and surviving the coronavirus were taken into analysis. In this sense, the study applied a purposive sampling method (Dörnyei, 2007; Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014).

There were 23 expressions either in the form of clause complex or clause simplex. However, since the analysis was carried out at finite clause rank, the number expanded to 32 clauses (see Appendix). This means that a dependent clause was analysed if it was finite only. Every clause was analysed following the SFL's transitivity analysis. This allowed us to figure out the occurrences of Participants, Processes, and Circumstance and their more specific subcategorisations (Actor, material Process, Circumstance of manner and so forth). These functional terms were coded and tagged in the form of a subscript in each clause. We provide the distributions of the functional elements in descriptive statistics to identify general trends of the data more easily. The statistics are not intended to be taken in a quantitative sense. Rather, they are used adjunctively in our effort to draw conclusions and implications of the study.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the distributions of Process, Participant, and Circumstance in the data. Process are presented first, followed by Participant and Circumstance.

4.1 Process

A Process is an obligatory part of a clause, and for this reason, it occurs in every clause in the data. Table 4 shows the distributions of the Process type found in the expressions shared by the COVID-19 survivors. As shown in Table 4, the relational Process occurs the most frequently, 18 times in total or equal to 56% of the total occurrence of Process in the corpus. The material Process comes second (nine times or 28%). The other processes only occur two or three times and are less significant.

Table 4. Distributions of Process.

Type of Process	Frequency (%)
Relational	18 (56%)
Material	9 (28%)
Behavioural	3 (9%)
Existential	2 (6%)
Total	32 (100%)

Thus, two of the six Process types are missing: mental and verbal Processes. This is perhaps because the corpus under examination is relatively modest. The other reason is likely because the sampled expressions were purposively selected in that only the direct quotes were examined. For example, in Excerpt 1 below:

[Excerpt 1]
It was like a roller coaster.

Part of the expression taken into analysis is only the first half of 'It was like a roller coaster' (dependent clause or direct quote), while the other second half of 'he said' (main clause) was ignored. As seen, the clause complex is paratactically related. If the expression were analysed as a clause complex as a whole, it would then contain the verbal Process, which is realized by the verb 'said'. The corpus contains examples of this kind either employed by the journalists or the survivors. In general, this language style is expected to occur in news stories.

Interestingly, the verb *feel* occurs frequently in the corpus. It occurs five times in total, preceded by an impersonal subject *it* and the personal subject 'I'. An example is shown in Excerpt 2 where the verb occurs after the personal subject:

[Excerpt 2]
I still feel alone.

The verb 'feel' in Excerpt 2 might be ambiguous at least for non-native English speakers. For one thing, it is tempting to categorize the verb *feel* in the sentence above as a mental Process as the subject is personal and, therefore, can occupy the functional label of *Senser*. On closer examination, however, 'feel' falls into the category of relational Process in which 'feel' is synonymous with 'be'. The other reason is that a mental Process needs to be followed by another nominal-type participant called *Phenomenon* (Eggins, 2004). Therefore, Excerpt 2 is categorized as a relational rather than a mental experience. The other constituent in the clause ('alone') functions as an *Attribute*, not a *Phenomenon*.

Relational Processes of the possessive type also occur, as illustrated in Excerpt 3:

[Excerpt 3]
I_[Carrier/Possessor] was getting_[Pr:Relational/Possessive] splitting headaches_[Attribute/Possessed].

The event of possession is shown by the verb *getting* and the *Attribute* or *Possession* by 'splitting headache' as a pain caused by COVID-19. In this expression, the survivor construes the experience as a possession. However, such a possession is not a typical form of possession that someone wants to keep. Instead, it is a possession that the survivor does not want to have but cannot get rid of.

The other relational Process type is the Identifying clause (as in Excerpt 4). This type only occurs once when one Participant is labelled Token, and the other is labelled Value. Fontaine (2013) refers to these labels as Identified and Identifying, respectively.

[Excerpt 4]

It_[Token] almost resembled_[Pr:Relational/Circ] having a little monkey on his back_[Value].

In Excerpt 4, the survivor identifies the experience of being afflicted with COVID-19 as having ‘a little monkey on his back’. It is obvious that the survivor means it metaphorically.

The material Processes need further explanation. Five out of nine material Processes in the data carry a metaphorical sense. One of them is shown in Excerpt 5:

[Excerpt 5]

I_[Actor] touched_[Pr:Material] death_[Goal].

The Process ‘touched’ meets the grammatical requirements of a material type in that it has a participating Actor (‘I’) and Goal (‘death’). Semantically, however, it is a metaphorical expression. Death is not a thing that can be touched. SFL categorizes this kind of abstract material Process in opposition to a concrete material Process. While an abstract material Process means metaphorically, a concrete one means literally. Berry (2019) argues that analysing an abstract material Process gives us a hint of what kind of metaphor it is. However, Berry (2019) does not say what kind of metaphor it is; this particular example can be categorized as a metaphor for a material Process that carries a stronger or more vivid meaning. A metaphorical expression as in Excerpt 5 is generally useful in facilitating communication despite its imprecise comparisons (Knowles & Moon, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 2003; Larson, 1984).

4.2 Participant

Like a Process, a Participant occurs compulsorily in a clause. However, certain types of Process require the presence of more than one Participant. For instance, a material Process requires an Actor and a Goal. Thus, Participant can outnumber Process, which is a natural consequence. Table 5 shows the distributions of Participants in the COVID-19 survivors’ expressions.

Table 5. Distributions of Participant.

Type of Participant	Frequency (%)
Carrier	16 (32%)
Attribute	16 (32%)
Actor	6 (12%)
Goal	4 (8%)
Behaver	2 (4%)
Existent	2 (4%)
Agent	1 (2%)
Token (Identified)	1 (2%)
Range	1 (2%)
Value (identifier)	1 (2%)
Beneficiary	1 (2%)
Total	50 (100%)

Table 2 demonstrates the type of Participants. Carrier, Attribute, Actor, and Goal occur more frequently than the other participants. This is in accordance with the frequency of Process shown in Table 1. When the Process is of relational type, one Participant will be labelled Carrier and the other Attribute. This type of relational Process is referred to as the Attributive clause.

There appear to be two reasons why Carrier and Attribute top the chart. The first reason is related to the functional label given to the dummy subject *it*. In this study, '*it*' is labelled as Carrier, a participating Participant in a relational Process. The status of '*it*' is, however, inconclusive. The dummy subject is not anaphorical or cataphorical in reference to most sentences in the data (except the clause in Excerpt 5). Therefore, it has no experiential meaning as far as the data is concerned. However, it certainly refers to information shared by the survivors and the journalist (interlocutors). In this case, the dummy '*it*' refers to the survivors' experiences after having been afflicted with and surviving COVID-19. Secondly, the transitivity analysis was carried out at the clause level. Consequently, a survivor's expression that forms a clause complex can have two clauses (one is the main clause, and the other is the dependent clause) and the Process types are often relational. This is shown in Excerpt 6:

[Excerpt 6]

It felt like my body was on fire.

The expression above is a clause complex consisting of two finite clauses; one includes the expression as a whole, that is, '*It felt like my body was on fire*', as analysed in Excerpt 7, and the other is '*my body was on fire*', as shown in Excerpt 8. Consequently, the dependent clause was analysed twice; as a constituent of the clause complex and on its own as a clause simplex. In Excerpt 7, '*like my body was on fire*' was labelled as Attribute as a whole, while in Excerpt 8, it has its own Carrier and Attribute.

[Excerpt 7]

It_[Carrier] felt_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] like my body was on fire_[Attribute/Circ:Manner].

[Excerpt 8]

My body_[Carrier] was_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] on fire_[Attribute/Circ:Manner].

Similarly, when the Process is material, one Participant will typically be realized by an Actor as the subject, while the others are Goal, Range, and Beneficiary as a complement. The data show that the complement of the material Process is realized, in order of frequency, by Goal, Range, and Beneficiary.

4.3 Circumstance

A Circumstance is an optional element in a clause. It is not surprising that Circumstances occur the least in the data. Table 6 shows their distributions in the data. As seen in Table 6, they infrequently occur in the data. The four types of Circumstances found are Manner, Condition, Location, and Direction. This is not surprising given that Circumstance does not occur compulsorily in a grammatical sense, resulting in its infrequent occurrences. The Condition type is realized by a

hypotactic clause, as shown in Excerpt 9, and the Manner type is realized by a nominal group, shown in Excerpt 10.

Table 6. Distributions of Circumstance.

Type of Circumstance	Frequency
Manner	1 (25%)
Condition	1 (25%)
Location	1 (25%)
Direction	1 (25%)
Total	4 (100%)

[Excerpt 9]

When you are at a high altitude [Circ:Condition], you struggle to breathe.

[Excerpt 10]

Coronavirus is an illness which is lived in solitude, in total solitude [Circ:Manner].

The data show other instances that carry circumstantial meaning. In these instances, the circumstantial meanings occur with relational Process with Attributive and Identifying types. In the Attributive clauses, the circumstantial meaning is expressed through Participant (the example is as in Excerpt 11), while in the Identifying clause, it is encoded through Process (as shown in Excerpt 12).

[Excerpt 11]

It[Carrier] was[Pr:Relational/Intensive] like drowning[Attribute/Circ].

[Excerpt 12]

It[Token] almost resembled[Pr:Relational/Circ] having a little monkey on his back[Value].

5. DISCUSSION

In most cases, the COVID-19 survivors construe their experiences of being afflicted by the virus in abstract or less tangible ways. The choices of Process types and figurative speech hint at such abstractness. While the first includes the frequent use of relational Processes, the latter involves metaphors and similes. Each is elaborated on further below.

Firstly, when the survivors were asked to describe their experience with COVID-19, the journalists likely asked them questions such as ‘How did it feel to be contracted with COVID-19?’ or ‘How did you feel to be contracted with COVID-19?’, and other questions of the kind. The expected answer would likely be formed in a descriptive, attributive, or identifying clause. A relational Process does just that where one Participant (Carrier or Token) is attributed to the other Participant (Attribute or Value). In some expressions, the Attributes are of the Circumstantial type (Circumstance of Manner), which describes or classifies the Carrier’s experience. When one speaker describes his experience with the virus as ‘It was like a roller coaster’, he tries to attribute or identify his COVID-19 experience to riding a roller coaster. In other words, using a relational Process, something is said to be related to something else (hence relational Process) although the relationship is not fully explainable.

The relation of both entities linked by a relational Process tends to be more abstract, as Fontaine (2013) suggested. This is because a relational Process only

demonstrates the state of being of two entities, and they are simply stated to exist in relation to each other (see [Eggins, 2004](#)). This particular assertion of abstractness is amplified by the fact that some Carriers are realized by dummy it. As noted above, its status as a Carrier is dilemmatic because, textually speaking, the dummy subject 'it' does not carry experiential meaning (see [Thompson, 2014](#); [Webster, 2015](#)). In fact, even though the dummy subject 'it' is anaphoric, the expressions it introduces carries an abstract sense as it refers to the situation as a whole, hinting at the magnitude of pain caused by the virus.

Secondly, the COVID-19 survivors' use of metaphors contributes to their abstract experience. The data show that they frequently use metaphors and similes. While the metaphors, as noted above, are of material type (realized through Process), the similes are of circumstantial type (realized through Attribute of Manner Circumstance introduced by the preposition 'like' as in Excerpt 11. Metaphors and similes differ slightly in that metaphors make direct comparisons between two domains while similes provide a less direct comparison, usually introduced with lexical markers such as 'as' and 'like'). Both, however, cannot be taken literally as they do not mean what they say ([Knowles & Moon, 2006](#); [Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 2003](#); [Larson, 1984](#); [Simpson, 1993](#)). Metaphors and similes can facilitate understanding, enough of a reason to understand their ubiquity in many texts, including pain expressions. Similes, in particular, grammatically suit such a descriptive aim, given that they can describe how an entity (Participant) behaves. Nevertheless, metaphors (and similes) create a fuzzy relationship between the two entities being compared. The two entities compared in a metaphorical expression are never totally similar meaning that they have similarities and differences. However, when using a metaphor, the speaker puts emphasis on their similarities and at the same time overlooks their differences. In other words, metaphorical expressions always result in information inaccuracy.

Furthermore, using metaphors can be considered an indirect way of communication. This is in contrast to a direct or literal way of communication where information is delivered literally. In this sense, one could argue that we argue that metaphorising is abstracting. The survivors in this study likely used such metaphorical expressions and abstractness to reflect their unfathomable experience of being afflicted and surviving the COVID-19 malady. In other words, they may find that telling their stories in literal expressions is insufficient; literal words fail them. After all, it was their (or others') first experience of being afflicted with and surviving COVID-19, and as such, they had no prior experience with comparable afflictions. If they had, they could have expressed their pain more literally by describing common symptomatic illnesses. The metaphors spoken by the survivors' metaphors also result in affective rather than informative communication (see [Hayakawa, 1968](#)). This is not surprising given that affective connotations of words, rather than informative connotations, stand out in discourses of pain or expressions of painful feelings. The affective meanings derived from these metaphors may be useful for members of the public who read the survivors' stories. This is because affective language can elicit strong emotions in readers and listeners and, in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, they can imagine the traumatic experiences of survivors. Such imagination can persuade them to follow health protocols related to COVID-19 prevention and control measures in the community.

The survivors' expressions can be related to the notion of conceptual metaphor first introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003). The conceptual metaphor (way of thinking) builds on the survivors' linguistic expressions (way of talking). In the data, expressions such as 'There is some microscopic battle going on', 'Anxiety invaded the room', 'Death prowled', and 'It feels like coronavirus has attacked every single one of my body systems' are loaded with metaphors that suggest fighting COVID-19 is just like fighting in a real battle ('COVID-19 is war'). This is shown by the choice of words like battle, invaded, prowled, and attacked. In addition, the strong metaphorical expressions such as 'I touched death', and 'I went to the gate of hell and came back' amplified such a construal. They construed their COVID-19 experience as a matter of life and death, like getting involved in a war. It is not surprising that the survivors take their survival as a benefit, miracle, or being given a second life. This reflects the seriousness and magnitude of the misery the virus can afflict humanity and their immense gratitude for having been cured of it.

The COVID-19 survivors also hint at the severity of their COVID-19 experience through the choice of the subject Participants in their expressions. Most of the subject Participants are realized by the pronoun 'I', dummy 'it', and possessive pronoun 'my' followed by a noun such as 'my body' or 'my morale'. This suggests that the pain experience caused by the virus affects the survivors' being as a whole rather than only a certain part of their body as in 'I was getting splitting headaches' or 'My throat is sore'. The possessive pronoun 'my' is slightly different in that it distinguishes a physical being ('My body was on fire') from a psychological being ('My morale is rock bottom'). Despite so, both still evoke the severity of pain the survivors experienced.

COVID-19 costs the survivors physically and psychologically. Physical pain is attributed to burning pain, breathing difficulty as they were drowning, living at a high altitude, persisting pain, or being pressed by a thick plate and being poked with needles on the chest. The psychological impact is related to unpleasant life such as living in solitude, despair, instability, and isolation, not only because they are required to keep physical and social distance from others as an epidemical precaution but also because they are isolated by front workers or community members, fearing of being contracted by the virus. One survivor reported that she felt like she was being treated as a pariah.

6. CONCLUSION

The human experience is transformed into meaning through language. This study has attempted to describe the experiences of people who had contracted and survived COVID-19 by examining their expressions within the SFL framework. Most of the survivors express their experiences by using relational Processes and abstract material Processes. The use of relational Processes suggests that they describe their painful experience as a state of being in which they assign their pain existence with attributes or other identities. The COVID-19 survivors also express their tragic experiences using abstract material Processes, carrying a metaphorical sense. Both the relational and abstract material Processes contain abstract descriptions. Such an abstract description suggests that, while they tried to describe their experiences, the survivors found them so unfathomable that they could only convey them in abstract meanings. This also

suggests that they tend to distance themselves from the pain afflicted by the virus. Such manners of expressions imply how dreadful COVID-19 had afflicted them.

This study limits itself to looking at COVID-19 survivor expressions from a comparatively small corpus. Also, even though all of the texts examined in this study were written in English, some were likely translated from other (source) languages. It is important to consider the texts' translations because the original texts' initial foreignness may have been lost in their domestication.

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APPENDIX

The Expressions of the COVID-19 Survivors

1. It_[Carrier] felt_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] like my body_[Carrier] was_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] on fire_{[Attribute/Circ:Manner][Attribute/Circ:Manner]}.
2. I_[Carrier/Possessor] was getting_[Pr:Relational/Possessive] splitting headaches_[Attribute/Possessed].
3. I_[Actor] touched_[Pr:Material] death_[Goal].
4. I_[Beneficiary/Recipient] have been given_[Pr:Material] a second chance_[Goal].
5. I_[Carrier] still feel_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] alone_[Attribute].
6. There is_[Pr:Existential] some microscopic battle going on_[existent].
7. It_[Carrier] was_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] like a roller coaster_[Attribute/Circ:Manner].
8. I_[Carrier] was feeling_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] like there is_[Pr:Existential] a thick plate pressuring my chest_[Existent] and needles poking my chest_{[Existent][Attribute/Circ:Manner]}.
9. It_[Token] almost resembled_[Pr:Relational/Circ] having a little monkey on his back_[Value]
10. I_[Behaver] couldn't sleep_[Pr:Behavioral].
11. Anxiety_[Actor] invaded_[Pr:Material] the room_[Goal].
12. Nightmares_[Actor] came_[Pr:Material].
13. Death_[Actor] prowled_[Pr:Material].
14. I_[Actor] went_[Pr:Material] to the gate of hell_[Circ:Location] and came_[Pr:Material] back_[Circ:Direction].
15. When you_[Carrier] are_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] at a high altitude_{[Attribute/Circ:Location][Circ:Condition]}, you_[Behaver] struggle_[Pr:Behavioural] to breathe_[Pr:Behavioral].
16. My morale_[Carrier] is_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] rock bottom_[Attribute].
17. Coronavirus_[Carrier] is_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] an illness which_[Range] is lived_[Pr:Material] in solitude, in total solitude_{[Circ:Manner][Attribute]}.
18. The mental drain of that_[Carrier] has been_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] just as tough, if not more so, than the virus itself_[Attribute/Circ:Manner].
19. They_[Agent] made_[Pr:Causative] me_[Carrier] feel_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] like a pariah_[Attribute/Circ:Manner].
20. It_[Carrier] was_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] like drowning_[Attribute/Circ:Manner].
21. It_[Carrier] feels_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] like coronavirus_[Actor] has attacked_[Pr:Material] every single one of my body systems_{[Goal][Attribute/Circ:Manner]}.
22. It_[Carrier] was_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] horrible_[Attribute].
23. We_[Carrier] feel_[Pr:Relational/Intensive] like we_[Carrier/Possessor]'ve had_[Pr:Relational/Possessive] a miracle_{[Attribute/Possessed][Attribute/Circ:Manner]}.