

## Representation of 'Dark Indonesia' Student Protests in Voice of America's English News: A Transitivity Analysis

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**Abstract:** Student protests have recently become a source of political and social polemic among society that is often influenced by how their actions are represented in media which in turn, shapes public perception and affects the outcome of their demands. The study examines how American news platforms portray the 'Dark Indonesia' student protests, a recent social movement opposing Indonesian government policies, focusing on the representation of participants, actions, and events through the lens of transitivity in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. As a major platform in global media, Voice of America English news has the power to impact not only domestic audiences, but also international communities. The purpose of the study is to uncover how language shapes the framing of the protests through an analysis of the verbs or processes used in each clause and how each social actor is represented through discursive strategies. The findings indicate that material verbs are the most dominant process used in the news. The 'Dark Indonesia' student protests framing is emphasized through their direct actions. The study argues that this linguistic focus on material processes justifies the protests by highlighting the significance of the movement and emphasizing the legitimacy of the protests in the eyes of the global audience.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language serves as an important medium in shaping how information is communicated and understood. As a tool for communication, language serves as a medium through which meaning is constructed and shaped by its context (Halliday, 1989). Fairclough (1989) also addresses how language is influenced by social power structures and ideologies. It happens in the context of the media, where the ideologies of the writers' shape language to represent some events or social actors. According to Hall (1997), representation refers to a process through which culture uses language to generate meaning. Therefore, the power dynamics among the media, journalists, and news organizations are related to each other. Even the same events and social actors can be interpreted differently by different people due to the contrast of their representations in the media. In this context, van Dijk (2008) points out that media discourse has a critical role in forming public perceptions of events and social actors within certain narratives.

According to Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974), the way the media frames these events or actors can emphasize controversy which in turn sparks debates among the public. The one that is discussed in this study is one of the Indonesian events that have become a discussion among the public, student protests. Tilly (1768) defines social movements, including student protests, as collective efforts by students who organize resources to address challenges which are established by the power structures. Since the mid-twentieth century, student protests have consistently intervened in national or international issues like social justice, government corruption, and civil rights. However, even though this type of movement aims to address social challenges, the actions are frequently represented in the media as either a threat to the government or a disruption to public facilities. The way that the media represents these movements can significantly impact public reaction and shape the outcome of such protests.

Certainly, media representation and language have become a subject of scholarly interest across different periods. Some previous studies have examined the representation of events or social actors in media by using linguistic perspectives, such as Asiru, Ogutu, and Orwenjo (2018) conducted a study on event and actors representation in selected Nigerian daily newspapers. Their study indicates that the representation of social actors in the data not only polarizes the news, but also introduces bias. Similarly, Worarattapong and Phoocaroesil (2023) use a corpus-based study to examine the representation of police, protesters, and students in Thailand's anti-government protest news. Their study reveals different portrayals of police, protesters, and students in two massive media outlets, which indicate a contrasting view on their actions. Several other prior studies explore similar themes of media representation and language which contribute more insights into this area of research, such as Systemic Functional Linguistics in political discourse (Evayani & Rido, 2019; Fitriani et al., 2021; Rajabi & Farshadi, 2024) social actor representation (Asad et al., 2021; Manar et al., 2020; Sahragard & Davatgarzadeh, 2010) media and influence (Hubbard et al., 1975; McQuail, 1977; Robinson, 2001) framing of protest (Ciurel, 2018; Johnston & Noakes, 2005; McLeod & Detenber, 1999) and media bias (Hamborg et al., 2019; Puglisi & Snyder Jr, 2015; Xiang & Sarvary, 2007).

Although these studies offer valuable insights, they share certain commonalities that point to a potential research gap. They rely on a wide range of media outlets which focus on generalized representations of social movements. This approach highlights the importance of diverse data for the wider applicability of findings. However, when examining the representation of student protests in a specific context, the cultural and contextual specificity of the data becomes crucial. Political, social, and cultural factors are important in shaping how protests are represented, especially within a given national context (Tilly, 1768). Addressing this gap, this study examines the recent student movement in Indonesia, which is represented in international media, to better capture the ideological framing that shapes global audiences to the protest.

It is essential to narrow the focus to more specific contexts where international media coverage plays a significant role in influencing public perception. The term "Dark Indonesia" refers to Indonesia's ongoing political tension under the order of Prabowo Subianto as the president, which has sparked protests and criticism from civil society, especially students. It has become significant to discuss this event as it will affect the perception of the global audience. Moreover, this study focuses on Voice of America's (VOA) coverage, which provides a unique perspective on how international media shapes global perceptions of domestic protests. Given that VOA is an influential global news source, its representation of these protests has the potential to affect how other media outlets represent the same event. Given the history of VOA from VOA public relations, they commenced broadcasting in 1942 with the aim of countering Nazi propaganda through accurate and impartial news reporting. However, many scholars have found that news coverage always represents the authors' political identity. Moreover, VOA serves more than 354 million people in a global audience weekly.

Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to examine how 'Dark Indonesia' student protest is represented in international news coverage and how this will impact global audience perception. It also analyzes the discursive strategies used by Voice of America to represent the social actors involved in the protest.

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1 Data Collection**

An anti-government protest called Indonesia Gelap (Dark Indonesia) against the budget cuts was organized in Jakarta, February 20th, 2025. The data for the present study were collected from Voice of America media outlets, which were published on the same day when the protests occurred. Although the article analyzed was published on the Voice of America website, the content was originally produced by Reuters. Therefore, the language analyzed reflects Reuters' journalistic strategies, while being distributed through the VOA platform. The focus of the analysis is on the news article titled "Students Lead 'Dark Indonesia' Protests Against Budget Cuts", which provides details of the protest. The texts were manually downloaded from Voice of America's official website. The content of the news was copied and pasted into a Word document for initial collection. In the next stage of the data collection, the text was transferred into an Excel spreadsheet, which was structured in clausal form by using the transitivity approach as

a part of Systemic Functional Linguistics, to find out the patterns and structured discourse analysis. A total of 42 clauses were identified to examine how participants, processes, and circumstances were represented in the article.

## **2.2 Data Analysis**

This study primarily applied Halliday's ideational metafunctions which focus on the transitivity approach as the analytical framework. Language has three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual function according to Halliday (1994). It means that the ideational function reflects how language represents experiences and the world around us. The experiential function is realized through the transitivity approach, which consists of six process types. To deepen the understanding about how power is embedded in language, this study also drew on Critical Discourse Analysis, specifically the Discourse-Historical Approach, developed by Wodak (2014) in which each social actor was examined in further detail that shaped their representation. Within this framework, the analysis focused on discursive strategies such as nomination, categorization, abstraction, and backgrounding. Bloor and Bloor (2013) classification of participants also helped this study to understand whether the participants are included or excluded from the processes. In addition, insights from framing theory provided a deeper lens into how international media represent global events. To remain relevant, recent approaches about media, language, and politics (Inegbe, 2024; Roslyng & Dindler, 2023) also were applied to this study.

## **2.3 Presentation of Analysis**

The results and discussion about the findings were categorized into two main groups: each clause was analyzed through the transitivity approach and representational choices based on social actor theory. The first analysis is presented by tables, consisting of information about the clause, actor, process type, verb, goal, and interpretation. For the social actor analysis, tables illustrate how different groups or individuals are represented using discursive strategies such as nomination, categorization, abstraction, and backgrounding.

# **3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

## **3.1 Grammatical Choices and the Shaping of Interpretation: Transitivity as a Tool of Representation**

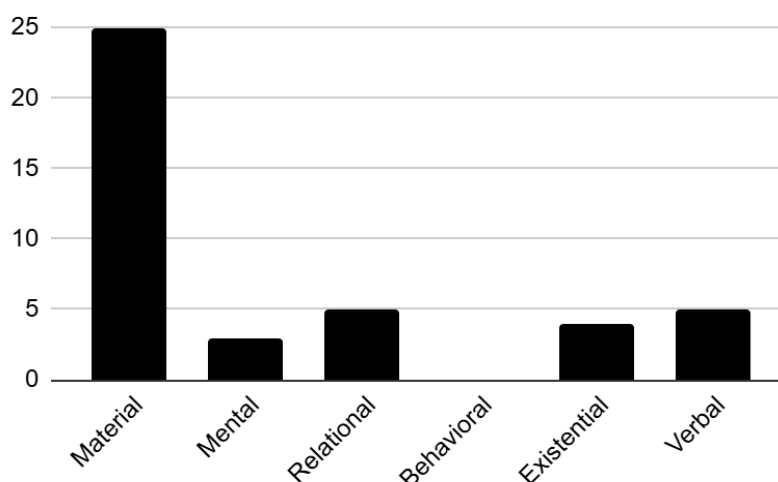
In the first section of results and discussion, this study explores how the article linguistically constructs the 'Dark Indonesia' protests through the lens of transitivity as a significant part of Halliday's (2013) ideational metafunction. Transitivity analysis focuses on how processes, participants, and circumstances are grammatically realized in clauses to reveal how actions are attributed and how agency is distributed. In media discourse, especially Critical Discourse Analysis, these grammatical choices are never objective. However, they reflect underlying ideological orientations by determining who is portrayed as acting, who is acted upon, and who is omitted altogether. By identifying and categorizing six process types (material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral, and existential), this analysis uncovers patterns of representation that highlight the roles of

key social actors, such as student protesters, government authorities, and police. The summary of the six types of processes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of Processes (Halliday, 2004)

Process Type	Category Meaning	Participants
Material	Doing	Actor, Goal
Mental	Happening	Senser, Phenomenon
	Seeing, wanting, thinking, feeling	
	Wanting	
	Thinking	
Relational	Feeling	Carrier, Attribute
	Attributing	
Verbal	Identifying	Token, Value
	Saying	
Behavioral	Behaving	Behaver
Existential	Existing	Existent

The analysis of process types reveals the patterns in the text's representation of actions and participants. Based on the chart provided below, material processes dominate with 25 occurrences and indicating a strong emphasis on tangible actions of the event that affect the perception of the global audience to focus on the demonstration. The next common process identified is the relational process, with a total of 5 clauses, which indicates that the news also wants to define the relationships among actors or entities. It goes the same with the verbal process that identified 5 times, which highlights the role of communication and expression in media, because they are important in shaping the narratives. Next, there are existential processes which are identified 4 times to show the mere existence of each entity. Lastly, behavioral processes are absent, which suggests that the article does not prioritize the depiction of psychological behaviors, and instead focuses on representations of the protest.



Picture 1. Frequency of Transitivity Processes

The analysis proceeds by examining each process type in detail and analyzing the clause structures to uncover how the event and participants are represented within the discourse. Starting with material process, as defined by Halliday (1989) and further developed by van Leeuwen (2008), material processes refer to actions and events that take place in the physical world and typically involve two key participants: the actor, who performs the action, and the goal, who is affected by the outcome of that action. The data analysis of material processes identified in the article is presented as follows:

#### Data 1

Clause	<i>"Thousands of students staged 'Dark Indonesia' protests in cities across the country on Thursday against budget cuts and other policies of President Prabowo Subianto"</i>			
Process	Actor	Verb	Goal	Circumstance
material	thousands of students	staged	'Dark Indonesia' protests	in cities across the country (place), on Thursday (time), against budget cuts and other policies (cause)

In this clause, the verb *"staged"* is a material process that emphasizes the students' effort in organizing the protest. The actor *"thousands of students"* is written to highlight mass participation and collective power. The goal *"'Dark Indonesia' protests"* signifies the action's direct outcome. The circumstances *in cities across the country* (place), *on Thursday* (time), and *against budget cuts and other policies* (cause) provide contextual details that show the coordinated reality of the protest, its timing, and its political goal.

#### Data 2

Clause	<i>"The government has vowed to resolve the issues raised by the protesters"</i>			
Process	Actor	Verb	Goal	Circumstance
material	the government	has vowed to resolve	the issues raised by the protesters	-

The verb *"has vowed to resolve"* is a material process that shows a strong commitment to future action with a strong intention. The actor *"the government"* is strategically placed to show it as the responsible authority responding to public demands. The goal *"the issues raised by the protesters"* emphasizes that the government's action is a direct response to protest demands. The absence of circumstances keeps the focus on the actor's promise rather than when or where the action will take place.

**Data 3**

Clause	<i>"The authorities are considering increasing security measures"</i>			
Process	Actor	Verb	Goal	Circumstance
material	the authorities	are considering	increasing security measures	-

The verb *"are considering"* as a material process tells potential future action, which is reflects strategic planning to achieve it. The actor *"the authorities"* is positioned in the clause to show institutional power. The goal *"increasing security measures"* indicates the object of that consideration, linking the authorities' actions to security concerns. The absence of circumstances keeps the statement focused on showing the audience what the authors are going to do to increase the security.

Meanwhile, mental processes refer to the internalized experiences that reflect how individuals engage with the world around them emotionally. Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) further emphasize that mental processes involve a participant's consciousness. This type of process allows discourse to represent what social actors think, feel, or perceive. The presence of mental processes can uncover subjectivity, bias, and ideological alignment, as they indicate whose thoughts and emotions are represented in the discourse. The data analysis of mental processes identified in the article is presented as follows:

**Data 4**

Clause	<i>"The public continues to show their support for the protests"</i>			
Process	Senser	Verb	Phenomenon	Circumstance
mental	the public	continues to show	their support	for the protests (purpose)

The verb *"continues to show"* is a mental process that emphasizes ongoing emotional engagement. The senser *"the public"* highlights collective awareness, while the phenomenon *"their support"* reflects the sentiment being expressed. The circumstance *"for the protests"* clarifies the purpose which frames the public as emotionally aligned with the protest movement. It shows that the public is engaged with the protest and justifies the event.

In addition, the next most commonly used type of process in critical discourse analysis is the relational process. Van Leeuwen (2008) is often cited in CDA for discussing relational processes in media and social contexts, as they are central to the representation of social actors and their relationships. According to Thompson (2013), relational processes function to link a carrier (the entity being described) with an attribute (the

quality, identity, or role assigned to it). This process does not describe actions but rather describes what something is or what it represents. The data analysis of relational processes identified in the article is presented as follows:

**Data 5**

Clause	<i>"Indonesia is dark"</i>			
Process	Carrier	Verb	Attribute	Circumstance
relational	Indonesia	is	dark	-

The relational verb *"is"* serves to assign a defining quality, *"dark,"* to the carrier *"Indonesia."* This attributive clause constructs a metaphorical characterization of Indonesia, implying a state of crisis. The absence of a circumstance keeps the statement bold and emphasizes the emotional weight of the attribute.

**Data 6**

Clause	<i>"Prabowo remains broadly popular across the sprawling country"</i>			
Process	Carrier	Verb	Attribute	Circumstance
relational	Prabowo	remains	broadly popular	across the sprawling country (place)

In this relational clause, *"Prabowo"* is the carrier, and *"remains"* functions as the verb, linking the carrier to the attribute *"broadly popular."* The attribute highlights Prabowo's continuing appeal among the population. The circumstance *"across the sprawling country"* provides spatial context, emphasizing the widespread of his popularity throughout the entire nation. This clause presents Prabowo as a well-known figure in Indonesia.

Another key process type is verbal process, which is very important in media discourse as it constructs credibility and perspective through reported speech or quotations. It refers to processes of saying, reporting, or communicating. Verbal processes involve three typical participants: the sayer (the one who communicates), the verbiage (the content of what is communicated), and the receiver (the one to whom the content is directed). According to Thompson (2013), verbal processes are crucial in representing how information is exchanged and whose voices are included or excluded in a text. The data analysis of verbal processes identified in the article is presented as follows:

**Data 7**

Clause	<i>"Indonesia is dark because there are many policies that aren't clear to our society," said Herianto,</i>			
Process	Sayer	Verbiage	Receiver	Circumstance
verbal	Herianto	<i>Indonesia is dark because there are many policies that aren't clear to our society</i>	-	-

In this verbal clause, "Herianto" is the sayer, who is the speaker conveying a statement. The verbiage *"Indonesia is dark because there are many policies that aren't clear to our society"* expresses Herianto's viewpoint, indicating a perception of confusion and uncertainty within the country. There is no explicit receiver in the clause, as the statement is directed to the audience. The absence of a circumstance leaves the focus on the content of the statement itself.

In terms of behavioral process, it refers to human psychological actions. According to Gerot and Wignell (1994, p. 56), behavioral processes refer to both physiological and psychological behaviors, such as *breathing, snoring, smiling, watching, and pondering*. Eggins (2004) describes behavioral processes as "processes of physiological and psychological behavior," which lie somewhere between material and mental processes. In terms of participant structure, behavioral processes typically involve a single obligatory participant known as the behavior, who is generally a conscious human being performing or experiencing the behavior. The data analysis of behavioral processes is not identified in the article.

Lastly, existential processes are used to represent the mere occurrence of something. According to Gerot and Wignell (1994), existential processes function to introduce new information or to bring attention to the presence of something in a given context. In media discourse, their use can significantly influence what is backgrounded in the discourse. These processes typically involve the word "there" and are followed by a form of the verb "to be" (e.g., *there is, there are, there was*), and a participant called the existent. The data analysis of existential processes identified in the article is presented as follows:

**Data 8**

Clause	<i>"There are concerns that it could disrupt government services"</i>		
Process	Existent	Verb	Circumstance
existential	concerns	are	that it could disrupt government services (cause)

In this existential clause, the verb “are” is used to introduce the existence of “concerns” as the entity being discussed. The clause emphasizes the presence of anxiety rather than action. The circumstance “that it could disrupt government services” serves as the cause or explanation for these concerns, which is the potential negative outcome of the situation. This clause highlights the uncertainty surrounding the government’s actions and their potential impact on public services.

### 3.2 The Role of Social Actors: Representation and Discursive Strategies

In critical discourse analysis, social actor representation is an important aspect of discourse as it can reveal the unseen ideologies within media texts. According to Wodak (2014), social actors are presented in a way that reflects their roles and relationships within a particular social context. Their representation is created by the discursive strategies of the media. Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach emphasizes that the linguistic construction of social actors is divided into four types, including nomination, categorization, abstraction, and backgrounding. In a similar aspect, Bloor and Bloor (2013) argue that the classification of social actors can reveal how they are included or excluded. They argue that through processes such as “nomination” (naming a social actor), “categorization” (assigning an actor to a community), and “differentiation” (contrasts between actors), media texts shape particular identities that influence public perception. The analysis of social actors’ representation is presented in the following table.

The discursive strategies used to identify the representation of social actors in texts are named nomination, categorization, abstraction, and backgrounding, which were developed by Wodak (2001). To reveal how they are positioned within a discourse, such as through personal names, titles, or group labels, nomination refers to the way social actors are named or referred to. Next, categorization involves grouping actors into specific roles or categories (e.g., “students,” “protesters,” “government officials”) that define their identity and function within the context of the discourse. In addition, the process of generalizing social actors, often using collective terms, which can create a sense of gap from specific actions, is called abstraction. Lastly, backgrounding involves the minimization of certain actors or actions, which creates them less visible or important within the narrative.

Social Actor	Discursive Strategy	Text on Article	Interpretation
Students	Nomination	<i>“Thousands of students staged ‘Dark Indonesia’ protests”</i>	The students are identified specifically as the main actors and portrayed as the initiators of the action, especially as it is written in the first clause.
	Backgrounding	<i>“Herianto, a student leader, said...”</i>	By focusing on one student leader, the larger group of students is backgrounded and

			fades the role of the broader collective of protesters. However, the clause is still bold and represents the collective protesters as Herianto is a student leader.
	Categorization	<i>"The students were also demonstrating against the military's move into civilian roles"</i>	The students are categorized as protesters with a clear political goal against the military's move.
Prabowo	Nomination	<i>"Prabowo remains broadly popular"</i>	Prabowo is directly named without any explanation of his role, emphasizing his individual authority, and the writers also might think the readers have known who Prabowo is.
	Categorization	<i>"The government has vowed to resolve the issues"</i>	Prabowo is categorized in terms of his role as a leader of the current Indonesia's government.
The public	Abstraction	<i>"The public continues to show their support for the protests"</i>	"The public" is a generalized term that abstracts individual identities and shifts the focus to collective societal sentiment rather than specific individuals.

The text shapes particular identities and roles for each actor and aligns with ideological positions by implementing discursive strategies such as nomination, categorization, abstraction, and backgrounding. First, the students are primarily represented through nomination, as seen in the phrase "Thousands of students staged 'Dark Indonesia' protests." This identification highlights their agency and shows them as the main actor and initiator of the protest, emphasizing their role in the event. However, their presence is also identified as backgrounding, particularly when attention shifts to an individual figure, such as "Herianto, a student leader." This narrows the focus from the collective to a single voice which minimizes the larger group's. However, Herianto is a student leader so his verbiage could represent the collective thoughts. The term

protesters is used to categorize the students, and show their purpose of the movement. This strategy contributes to presenting them not just as ordinary youth, but also has an important role in shaping the future of the nation. Second, Prabowo Subianto, who serves as the current Indonesian president, is represented both through nomination and categorization. His name is directly mentioned without any explanation of his role, which shows that he has the authority, and the writers assume that the readers already know him. At the same time, he is also referred to as “the government,” where he is categorized in his political role acknowledging his position. Finally, the public is represented through abstraction, which uses a generalized term that removes individual identity to show the collective strength and power of the civilians who also support the protest. This strategy intends to highlight that the problem extends beyond a specific group or identity, but represents a broader societal concern.

Through transitivity and discursive strategies analysis, it shows that the article illustrates how the protest is justified by focusing on material verbs and the often occurrence of the students as the main actors. According to Roslyng and Dindler (2023), discourse and framing analysis have a different focus, but both support each other to provide a sharper media analysis. This idea is supported by the findings of a previous study, which argues that the use of constructive language in political discourse aims to maintain democratic stability and avoid social unrest (Inegbe, 2024).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

To emphasize the concrete and tangible actions of ‘Dark Indonesia’ Student Protests, this study has revealed that material processes are dominant in the analyzed text, with a total of 25 material clauses out of the total number of clauses. As defined by Halliday (1989), material process refers to the process of doing something. In this analysis, the main focus of the narrative is to show the event currently happening, the participants involved, and the consequences it has. The dominant use of material processes highlights the representation of the event through impactful movement, which is particularly performed by students. This also shows that students are active participants in reinforcing their central role in the protest. On the other hand, the limited numbers of mental, behavioral, and existential processes portray participants in terms of what they physically contribute to the protest, rather than how they experience it. This representation shows that the narrative constructs the students as effective actors, which simplifies their representation to what they do rather than who they are. This representation indicates several possible ideological purposes. By highlighting more action rather than psychological events, the global media may aim to present the protests as politically significant to shape a broader international narrative of democratic activism. The media also tries to turn a significant and complicated Indonesian event into a simplified story that fits a global audience’s expectations and understanding. Furthermore, the discursive strategies implemented in representing social actors involved, selectively emphasizing certain roles and minimizing others. Through this strategy, the media ensures that the protest appears less radical and more acceptable to

the global audience to align with the more conventional understanding of democratic movements.

The significant findings of this study show how linguistic choices in international news media can shape public perceptions of the protest. By exposing these patterns through systemic functional linguistic analysis, the study contributes to a more critical understanding of media discourse. Additionally, the ideology embedded in the new discourse is also uncovered in this study through transitivity analysis. In this case, we can better understand how global media construct such narratives about political events, such as protests, elections, speeches, etc. The topic of this study also helps audiences understand and become more aware of the language choices that influence what stories are told, whose voices are shown, and how events are represented. By doing so, it also promotes media literacy in which challenges the assumptions that news reporting is always neutral and be more critical in interpreting the content. As this study primarily examines one selective media, future research could significantly benefit from leveraging this analysis by examining how the representation of similar protests is represented across multiple media platforms, both local and global. By comparing local and international media outlets, researchers can develop a more holistic perspective of how the ideology embedded in the narrative may vary depending on the geographical contexts of the media.

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