



VNU Journal of Foreign Studies

Journal homepage: <https://jfs.ulis.vnu.edu.vn/>

A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR STUDY ON IDEATIONAL METAPHOR IN ENGLISH BUSINESS CONTRACTS

Nguyen Thi Thanh Hoa*

Hanoi University of Mining and Geology, No.18 Vien Street, Dong Ngac Ward, Hanoi, Vietnam

Received 06 November 2025

Revised 20 January 2026; Accepted 22 June 2026

Abstract: A business contract is a kind of legal discourse which is said to be highly technical, abstract, and impersonal. These features are majorly identified through specific grammatical resources. Within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), ideational metaphor which is specified with the metaphorical reconstrual of processes plays a crucial role in creating discursual functions in English business contracts. This study aims to identify, categorize, and interpret ideational metaphor in English business contracts by analyzing how different process types contribute to the construction of contractual meaning and legal formality. The study investigates 20 authentic English business contracts collected from diverse categories, including transfer agreements, advertising services, business collaboration, purchase and sale of goods. The research employs a mixed-method approach by combining quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative functional interpretation. The results show that ideational metaphor, which reflects actions, duties, and states in contractual speech, is prevalent in material and relational processes whereas uncommon in mental, verbal, and existential processes. Notably, no occurrences of behavioral process are found in ideational metaphor. The study demonstrates that ideational metaphor is a central linguistic resource in English business contracts, contributing significantly to their abstract, impersonal, and technical nature.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Grammar, ideational metaphor, experiential meaning, nominalization, legal discourse

* Corresponding author.

Email address: hoanguyen161083@gmail.com<https://doi.org/10.63023/2525-2445/jfs.ulis.5664>

ÂN DỤ Ý TƯỢNG TỪ QUAN ĐIỂM NGŨ PHÁP CHỨC NĂNG HỆ THỐNG TRONG HỢP ĐỒNG THƯƠNG MẠI TIẾNG ANH

Nguyễn Thị Thanh Hòa

Trường Đại học Mỏ - Địa chất, Số 18 Phố Viên, Phường Đông Ngạc, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

Nhận bài ngày 06 tháng 11 năm 2025

Chỉnh sửa ngày 20 tháng 01 năm 2026; Chấp nhận đăng ngày 22 tháng 6 năm 2026

Tóm tắt: Hợp đồng thương mại là một loại văn bản pháp lý có tính kỹ thuật cao, trừu tượng và khách quan. Những đặc điểm này được xác định thông qua việc sử dụng các nguồn lực ngữ pháp cụ thể. Dưới góc nhìn của ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống (SFG), ẩn dụ ý tượng được xác định thông qua việc tái cấu trúc ẩn dụ của các kiểu quá trình nhằm tạo ra các chức năng diễn ngôn trong hợp đồng. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm xác định, phân loại và giải thích ẩn dụ ý tượng trong hợp đồng thương mại tiếng Anh thông qua việc phân tích chức năng của các kiểu quá trình nhằm diễn đạt tính pháp lý của các hợp đồng. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện trên ngữ liệu gồm có 20 hợp đồng thương mại tiếng Anh. Các hợp đồng này bao gồm nhiều loại hình khác nhau như: các thỏa thuận chuyển nhượng, dịch vụ quảng cáo, hợp tác kinh doanh, mua bán hàng hóa. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp kết hợp phân tích tần suất định lượng cùng với giải thích chức năng định tính của các kiểu quá trình xuất hiện trong hợp đồng thương mại tiếng Anh. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy quá trình vật chất và quá trình quan hệ xuất hiện phổ biến hơn so với quá trình tinh thần, quá trình phát ngôn và quá trình tồn tại nhằm phản ánh các hành động, nghĩa vụ và trạng thái trong hợp đồng. Nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra rằng quá trình hành vi không xuất hiện trong hợp đồng. Nghiên cứu cho thấy ẩn dụ ý tượng là một nguồn lực ngôn ngữ trong hợp đồng thương mại tiếng Anh góp phần tạo nên tính trừu tượng, tính khách quan và kỹ thuật.

Từ khoá: ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống, ẩn dụ ý tượng, nghĩa trải nghiệm, quá trình danh hoá, diễn ngôn pháp lý

1. Introduction

Institutional discourse is greatly influenced by language, especially in corporate and legal settings where authority, clarity, and precision are critical. Grammatical metaphor (GM), first proposed by Halliday (1994) and later developed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), is a key concept in Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) among the different linguistic processes that contribute to such discourse. When a function that is normally stated by one grammatical class is realized by another, for example, a process depicted as a noun instead of a verb, this is known as grammatical metaphor. By using this process, authors can improve the coherence and density of their texts by encoding abstract, concise, and formal statements of meaning.

In the genre of business contracts, grammatical metaphor serves distinctive communicative and functional purposes. Contracts are designed to establish rights, duties, and obligations between parties in a manner that is legally binding and unambiguous. To achieve this, drafters often employ nominalizations and other forms of grammatical metaphor that transform dynamic processes (e.g., *perform, agree, pay*) into static entities (e.g., *performance, agreement, payment*). Such transformation allows contractual provisions to appear objective and timeless, minimizing the visibility of human agency while foregrounding institutional authority and obligation. Consequently, grammatical metaphor contributes not only to the

precision and conciseness of contract language but also to its impersonality and formal tone.

Extensive research has been conducted to explore metaphorical metaphor in some professional and legal discourses, in which nominalisation is utilized as markers of abstraction and authority. Some examples can be listed as follows. Bhatia (1983) identifies legal discourse as marked by dense information packaging, long and syntactically complex sentences, and frequent use of nominalised structures. Colombi (2006) similarly notes that grammatical metaphor plays a crucial role in constructing the abstract, formal, and technical character of written genres.

Wu and Cai (2016) conducted a corpus-based comparison between two professional genres: marine engineering and maritime legal regulation. The research findings reveal that legal and regulatory English demonstrates a significantly higher density of ideational grammatical metaphors, especially through nominalisation, reflecting the need for objectivity, stability, and impersonality in legal discourse. This study provides a useful insight into comparison between technical and legal genres, highlighting how grammatical metaphor contributes to the formalisation and codification of obligations and responsibilities. Kaczmarek (2013) examined how legal texts balanced precision and abstraction. In spite of not focusing exclusively on grammatical metaphor, her research underscores the linguistic tension between precision and interpretive flexibility in law. Through her analysis of nominal forms and abstract constructions, Kaczmarek illustrated how legal drafters employed nominalisation to achieve both generality and authority, connecting grammatical metaphor to broader interpretive and pragmatic concerns in multilingual legal contexts.

In the context of Vietnam, Nguyen (2022) applied SFG to examine grammatical metaphor in Vietnamese economic contracts. Although the study focuses on economic rather than strictly legal documents, it demonstrates the prevalence of nominalisation in representing actions and processes as abstract entities, a linguistic feature that enhances impersonality and legal formality. This work provides a valuable insight into how grammatical metaphor functions within the Vietnamese professional discourse systems.

It might be argued that although these studies have established a theoretical and empirical foundation for examining the grammatical metaphor in legal discourse, there is a gap in investigating ideational metaphor in English business contracts from the SFG perspective, which is the reason why this study will be conducted. The study answers the following questions:

- 1. What process types are employed to convey ideational metaphor in English business contracts?*
- 2. What are the linguistic features of English business contracts?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Systemic Functional Grammar

SFG is the theory which is used to analyze language based on the three meta functions naming experiential function, interpersonal function, and textual function. According to researchers, the greatest advantage of SFG over traditional grammar is that it reflects the social dimensions and dynamic nature of language, placing language in a social context and emphasizing its communicative function. In Halliday's point of view, grammar is viewed as a system, not as rules. He believes that language has a potential for meaning. He equates meaning with function and uses clauses as the basic unit for explaining linguistic function. According to

Halliday, the functional organization of language determines its form and grammatical rules. He asserts that language is a communication tool and must perform the three functions (metafunctions):

(a) The experiential function answers the questions “Who?”, “What?”, “Where?”. It reflects human experience about the world around and within the speaker.

(b) The interpersonal function is a form of influence that establishes a relationship between the speaker and the listener. The interpersonal function of a clause is to alternately change roles in ways that influence each other through language: statements, questions, suggestions or commands. This function considers whether the speaker or writer has a neutral attitude which is expressed through the use of positive or negative language. Social distance, class, and rank will compel the speaker to use an appropriate degree of “intimacy”.

(c) Textual function is the connection between the preceding and following parts of the text, and to the external situation. The textual function of a clause is to construct a message. For each situation, it is necessary to establish the context to determine what is the subject and what is the argument.

According to SFG, context plays an extremely important role in language models as well as in meaning generation in social contexts. Each person acquires and builds up their own linguistic experiences from different contexts of language use. For example, a speech will use different language from a love letter, because the contexts in which the two texts are used are different. Additionally, with their own linguistic experience, language users are able to infer the contexts of the language they hear or read, and can distinguish them reasonably; for example, distinguishing harsh reprimands from gentle criticism, and from resentful reproaches.

Systemic functional grammarians argue that language always appears in context in the form of discourse. Discourse is a segment of language in function, meaning “language is functional” (Halliday, 1985). Discourse can be in written or spoken form. A discourse is a set of meanings that are harmoniously interwoven and consistent with the purpose of the discourse as well as appropriate to the context. The two most important characteristics of a discourse are texture and structure. Texture is the way the meanings in a discourse are connected harmoniously and coherently. Structure is the way in which discourses contain mandatory structural components that are appropriate to the purpose and context of that text. A discourse always appears in the two contexts, including the cultural context and the situational context.

2.2. Grammatical Metaphor

2.2.1. Studies on Grammatical Metaphor in the World

Halliday developed SFG which consists of field, tenor and mode with meta-functions such as experiential metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual meta function. In the book “Grammar, Society and the Noun”, Halliday (1966) stated that people often nominalize things and objects and in order to learn new things, they chose to name as many things as possible.

According to Halliday, nominality means freedom to transform in many different ways. The diversity and flexibility of nominalization, at the same time lead to the existence of nominalization as the most powerful resource to create grammatical metaphor. Halliday (2003) emphasized that language was a semantic resource because it carried an abundant system of choices and transformations. Grammatical metaphor was officially introduced in the work “*An Introduction to Functional Grammar*” published in 1985. In his work, Halliday discussed the ways of expressing grammatical metaphor through language. Since Halliday (1985) officially

introduced grammatical metaphor, a lot of scholars in the world have paid much attention to this phenomenon. Ideological systematically discussed by Halliday and Matthiessen (1999) was a significant anthology of grammatical metaphor. After that, Martin (1992) added a significant type of grammatical metaphor which was called textual grammatical metaphor.

Additionally, a large number of linguistic researchers are interested in grammatical metaphor. The fundamental idea of systemic functional linguistics, according to Halliday (1985), is the use of language's function, which dictates the selected language form to accomplish that objective. Devrim (2015) drew inspiration for "Teaching Grammatical Metaphor" from this. The author has thoroughly described how grammatical metaphor is used in both teaching and doing research, underscoring its significance as the foundation of written language and the fact that it continues to be the discourse in academic and scientific settings.

2.2.2. Studies on Grammatical Metaphor in Vietnam

Studies on grammatical metaphor have been mentioned in the scientific works by Diep (2005), Hoang (2012), Dinh (2015), Phan (2015), and Nguyen (2015). Particularly, Diep (2005) argued that verbs and adjectives are transformed into nouns, which constitutes grammatical metaphor. Hoang (2012) approached grammatical metaphor from the perspective of Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. His work has played a significant role in helping foreign language teachers in general, and English teachers in particular to keep pace with worldwide advances in foreign language teaching and learning. He classified grammatical metaphor into two types such as ideational and interpersonal metaphor. The research findings show grammatical metaphor results from nominalization. Although the work is a preliminary study on the nature of grammatical metaphor, it attracted and spread the trend of research on systemic functional grammar as well as grammatical metaphor. Diep (2005) said that word class was used in one clause but transformed in another clause. He believed that this process was called grammatical metaphor. Yang (2008) introduced and distinguished types of metaphors. He clearly stated the differences between types of metaphors while emphasizing the theory of grammatical metaphor, providing an overview of the history of grammatical metaphor, the difficulties in research on grammatical metaphor and guiding readers towards an accurate and objective perspective. Le (2020) pointed out samples of ideational metaphor and relations with Vietnamese.

2.3. Ideational Metaphor

The concept of grammatical metaphor (GM) originates from *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL), developed by Halliday (1985, 1994) as a theory of language as a social semiotic system. In the perspective of SFG, metaphor extends beyond the lexical level to encompass the grammatical domain, allowing alternative grammatical realizations of the same experiential meaning. Halliday (1994, p. 341) defines grammatical metaphor as a "variation in the expression of a given meaning", where meaning is restructured through a shift in grammatical class or function. The most frequently studied type of grammatical metaphor is ideational metaphor, which involves the transformation of processes and qualities into nouns or nominal groups, which is called nominalization. This transformation enables the condensation of clauses into nominal forms, thereby increasing lexical density, abstraction, and technicality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). For example, the clause *The company agreed to deliver the goods* can be metaphorically expressed as *The agreement for delivery of goods*. Through such transformation, dynamic processes are reified into abstract entities that can be manipulated grammatically as objects or participants within a clause. Halliday and Martin

(1993) argue that this grammatical reconfiguration underpins the development of scientific and administrative registers, where accuracy, objectivity, and a high degree of information packing are expected of language.

Both international and national literature review will be discussed. In Systemic Functional Grammar, ideational metaphor is referred to as one dimension of grammatical metaphor, conveying experiential meanings which are typically realized through congruent grammatical forms. For example, process types are identified with verbs which are nominalized (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). This metaphorical reconstrual enables speakers and writers to condense processes into abstract entities. International scholars have demonstrated that ideational metaphor plays a vital part in academic, scientific, legal, political, and economic discourses, among which are the studies in English academic writing written by (Halliday, 1998; Banks, 2005; Biber et al., 2011). The findings show that nominalized processes to convert verbs analyze into *analysis*, *develop into development*, *implement into implementation*, and regulate into *regulation*. This transformation allows writers to construct knowledge as stable, impersonal, and authoritative. Recently, international researchers also highlight the educational implications of ideational metaphor in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL). They argue that the proficiency in grammatical metaphor is a key factor of literacy and academic success. Some studies could be listed like Alhusaiyan (2025), Tampubolon and Sidabutar (2025), Sirait et al. (2025). In Vietnam, there are limited studies in ideational metaphor. They conducted a cross-linguistic study of ideational metaphor in English and Vietnamese behavioral clauses. The study makes a contribution to interpreting the three major types of typical patterns of the ideational grammar of behavioral clauses in English and Vietnamese within the framework elaborated by Halliday and Matthiessen (2000, 2004); Martin (1992) as well as making comparisons of these patterns in the two languages. In another study conducted by Gia and Phan (2022), research findings indicate how ideational metaphor restructures process choices and nominalizations across discourses.

It is suggested that international studies have focused on English academic writing in general, with limited attention to specific professional genres such as business, legal, or institutional texts, especially from the perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar. Besides, empirical studies that link ideational metaphor usage to instructional practices and learner outcomes in non-native English contexts are still uncommon. In the Vietnamese context, research on ideational metaphor remains limited in both scope and quantity. Existing studies have mainly adopted a cross-linguistic or clause-type-oriented approach, concentrating on particular process types (e.g., behavioral clauses) or broad discourse comparisons. There is a noticeable lack of examination into how ideational metaphor operates within specific genres or registers, as well as how it contributes to meaning-making in English.

2.4. Nominalization in Business Writing

Nominalization, the process of changing verbs, adjectives, or clauses into nouns, which allows authors to condense complex processes or actions into compact nominal forms. For example, “*decide*” becomes “*decision*”, or “*the company expanded*” becomes “*the expansion of the company*”. This transformation is not merely grammatical; it has significant implications for meaning, formality, and interpersonal stance.

In business writing, nominalization has several significant functions. First of all, by depersonalizing activities and lowering the emphasis on agents, it encourages formality and impartiality. This fosters objectivity and professionalism that are appropriate for legal and business settings. Secondly, nominalization improves information density, which makes it

possible to fit more layers of meaning into fewer words. This is crucial for documents like contracts, policy statements, and reports where precision and concision are important. Thirdly, by emphasizing outcomes, procedures, or responsibilities rather than individual, nominalization adds to the impersonality and authority of business discourse. For instance, the clause “*The team approved the plan*” may be rephrased as “*The approval of the plan was completed*”, shifting focus from actors to actions and outcomes.

2.5. Grammatical Metaphor in Legal Discourse

Legal discourse has long been recognized for its distinctive linguistic features, including formality, precision, and abstraction (Bhatia, 1993; Tiersma, 1999). Grammatical metaphor plays a crucial role in achieving these characteristics. Through nominalization, legal writers convert actions and obligations into entities that can be defined, referenced, and modified across different clauses (Gotti, 2008). For instance, *The parties agree to terminate the contract* becomes *The termination of the contract shall occur by mutual agreement*. This shift not only imparts a formal tone but also establishes a depersonalized stance, foregrounding institutional procedures rather than individual actors.

Research on grammatical metaphor in legal texts has revealed its importance in constructing legal reasoning and authority. Achugar and Colombi (2008) emphasized that metaphorical grammatical choices in institutional discourse reflect underlying power relations, where language serves to legitimize institutional control and depersonalize agency. Similarly, Baratta (2010) demonstrated that nominalization enables legal documents to encode abstract entities such as *rights*, *obligations*, and *liabilities*, which are central to legal interpretation. These nominalized concepts function as the building blocks of legal logic, allowing contracts and statutes to present themselves as stable systems of reference rather than dynamic human interactions.

However, most prior studies have concentrated on legislative and judicial texts rather than business contracts. Bhatia (1993) noted that contracts represent a hybrid genre that combines legal precision with business pragmatism, requiring a balance between formality and functional clarity. In this context, grammatical metaphor not only performs the traditional role of abstraction but also facilitates the negotiation of commercial relationships. The linguistic realization of obligations, rights, and conditions through nominalized and impersonal structures ensures the document’s universality and durability, even across cultural or linguistic boundaries.

The reviewed literature highlights several important trends. First, grammatical metaphor is a fundamental mechanism for achieving abstraction and cohesion in formal written registers. Second, legal discourses rely on nominalization to express complex systems of obligation and authority. Third, while the theoretical foundations of grammatical metaphor are well established, its specific manifestations and communicative roles in English business contracts remain underexplored.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research employs a mixed-methods design that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate grammatical metaphor in English business contracts. The quantitative method involves identifying and calculating the frequency of grammatical metaphors in the corpus to reflect the characteristics of business contracts, while the qualitative method focuses on analyzing their functions and communicative roles within contractual discourse. The research is based on the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) framework developed by Halliday

(1994), and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), which views language as a resource for meaning making across different metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Within this theoretical foundation, grammatical metaphor, particularly ideational type, is examined as a means by which contractual language achieves abstraction, precision, and authority.

3.2. Data Collection

20 English business contracts are collected for the data of the study. These contracts consist of a range of business fields, including supply agreements, service contracts, sales contracts, and partnership agreements. The selected contracts vary in length from 1,500 to 6,000 words. Each contract follows a conventional legal format, including introduction, definitions, clauses, and concluding sections such as signatures and legislation. The diversity of contractual types provides a representative sample of the business contract genre and facilitates a balanced analysis of grammatical metaphor use across different contexts and purposes.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis process undergoes the following steps. In the first place, each contract was read carefully to identify instances of ideational grammatical metaphor. In the second place, identified grammatical metaphors are classified according to process types (material, relational, mental, existential, behavioural and verbal). Frequencies and relative percentages are calculated to determine the dominant type of process used in the corpus. To interpret communicative functions, selected samples are analyzed to examine how ideational grammatical metaphor makes its contribution to the expression of obligation, authority, contractual precision and interpersonal relationship between contractual parties.

4. Findings

A total of 840 instances of ideational metaphor are found out. The ideational metaphor is identified through processes consisting of material, relational, verbal, mental and existential, which reflects the informational and structural characteristics of contractual language. These findings are shown in the table below.

Table 1

Distribution of Processes in English Business Contracts

Process Types	Frequency	Percentage
Material	410	48.8%
Relational	260	30.9%
Mental	80	9.5%
Verbal	70	8.3%
Existential	20	2.5%
Total	840	100%

The findings show that among process types, material account for the highest metaphorical density, which is followed by relational with 48.8% and 30.9% respectively. The material process typically reflects actions of performance, transfer, and compliance whereas relational process is used to define roles, statuses, and conditions within contractual relations (e.g., *is the guarantor, is liable for damages*). The lower frequency of grammatical metaphor belongs to mental process (9.5%), verbal process (8.3%), and existential process (2.5%), which are used to specialize and support roles in conveying knowledge, communication, and existence respectively.

4.1. Material Process

Material processes, in which the participants are the actor and the goal, are used to describe material clauses in English business contracts. Material processes usually take the form of clauses including an Actor and a Process in a congruent manner (e.g., The corporation signed the contract). However, in a metaphorical form, a nominalized structure like the firm signing the contract may achieve the same meaning. This conversion turns a dynamic action into an abstract entity by transforming the verb "sign" (a process) into the noun "signing" (a thing). While doing research, we collected and analyzed the examples as follows.

Example 1

Party A and Party B have to sign a new lease in case of adjustment of rental price due to house improvement, expansion, upgradation; or there is an increase (decrease) in the number of tenant members or a new rental price promulgated by the Chairman of City People's Committee.

It is believed that by converting the following verbs (*adjust, improve, expand*) into nominal forms (*adjustment, improvement*), the clause removes participants' agency and feelings. The result is a depersonalized representation of obligations and contingencies, typical aspects of a legal register. The actors responsible for the changes (e.g., the landlord, the tenants, the government) are backgrounded, creating an effect of neutrality and authority. Additionally, nominalizations allow complex legal situations to be compressed into compact noun phrases (e.g., *adjustment of rental price due to house improvement*). This syntactic condensation supports the density and precision required for contracts, where multiple conditions are layered within a single sentence. By turning processes into entities, the clause constructs the circumstances as abstract "legal facts" rather than contingent human actions. By stabilizing meaning and lowering interpretive ambiguity, this metaphorical abstraction strengthens the text's legal authority and durability.

Example 2

The Bank issues the guarantee after the Company has finished the procedures for measures guaranteeing the guaranteed obligations stated in Article 4 of this contract.

It is said that by converting human actions (*ensure, oblige*) into abstract nouns (*procedures, measures*), the text removes personal agency, creating the impression of neutrality and objectivity. This suits the tone of a legal contract. Besides, the text can reduce complex legal relationships into small linguistic units thanks to nominalization.

4.2. Relational Process

According to Halliday, relational processes are those that use verbs like *be, have, become, represent, or produce* to convey states of *being, identity, and attribution*. By categorizing or characterizing them, these procedures serve to tie one entity to another (e.g., The contract is legitimate; The renter is liable). However, when metaphorically realized, dynamic relations are reduced to abstract entities through nominalization or complicated noun phrases, which reconstitute relational meanings. For example, "The contract is valid" can be metaphorically realized as "the validity of the contract", where the nominalized term validity represents the relational process. By changing from a clause to a nominal group, the clause can participate in higher-ranking clauses and its grammatical density is increased, which helps textual cohesion and abstraction. Moreover, metaphorical realizations in relational processes serve to objectify social or legal relations, conceal agents, and enhance impersonality, key characteristics in formal genres. For instance, in business contracts, "*The parties are obligated*

to perform the duties” can be metaphorically realized as *the obligation of the parties to perform the duties*, where the relational process “*are obligated*” is nominalized into “*obligation*”. This construction foregrounds the abstract concept (*obligation*) rather than the acting participants (*parties*), aligning with the formal and authoritative style of institutional discourse.

Grammatical metaphor in relational process supports abstraction and technicality in legal writing, while also constructing a discourse of authority, neutrality, and precision. Through such metaphors, relational meanings are recontextualized as entities within the discourse, shaping the texture and rhetorical power of specialized registers. While doing research, we collected and analyzed the examples as follows.

Example 3

The company is the guarantor.

The clause realizes a relational identifying process, in which “*is*” functions as the relational process, linking the Carrier “*The company*” to the Attribute “*the guarantor*”.

In this example, “*The company is the guarantor*”, the process “*to guarantee*” has been nominalized into “*the guarantor*”, turning a process (action) into a participant (entity). This shift from verb to noun represents an ideational metaphor, which conveys the company's legal role. This transformation improves the formality and impartiality that are common in business or legal discourse.

Example 4

The obligation of timely payment is on the tenant.

In this example, the process of *paying* (an action) has been nominalized into a thing “*the obligation of timely payment*”. Instead of describing what the tenant does, the clause represents an abstract entity (obligation) that is possessed by the tenant.

4.3. Existential Process

A metaphorical form arises when the existence of something is not encoded through the congruent existential process but through nominalization. This change condenses information and abstracts experience, which is common in formal registers like academic writing or business contracts. For example, instead of saying “*There is an agreement between the Company and the Supplier.*” One example of a metaphorical variation could be:

Example 5

The existence of an agreement between the Company and the Supplier is acknowledged.

In this example, the existential meaning “*there is an agreement*” has been nominalized into “*the existence of an agreement*”, which functions as a Thing (a noun phrase). It is supposed that by nominalizing existence “*the existence of rights*”, legal or business documents sound more impersonal and formal condensation of information. Furthermore, in legal discourse, existential metaphors help encode obligation or authority implicitly.

4.4. Verbal Process

A verbal process illustrates processes of saying such as *say, state, declare, notify, or inform*. In congruent form, the verbal process is typically expressed through a verbal group (e.g., *The Company states that the Buyer shall pay*). However, in metaphorical form, the process of saying is nominalized, changing actions into nouns (e.g., *state*→*the statement, declare*→*the declaration, notify*→*the notification*). This changes the clause's form from dynamic to static, satisfying the contractual requirement for precision and objectivity. The grammatical metaphor

in verbal process is illustrated in the following examples

Example 6

Congruent form: The Company declares that the contract is terminated.

Metaphorical form: The declaration of contract termination shall be made by the Company.

Example 7

Congruent form: The Guarantor states that it will fulfil the obligation.

Metaphorical form: The Guarantor's statement of obligation fulfillment is required.

In examples 6 and 7, the verbal process (*declare, state*) is rephrased as a thing (*declaration, statement*).

Grammatical metaphors are said to be an effective language technique in English business contracts. By transforming the dynamic acts of communication into static legal entities through the nominalization of verbal meaning, it enhances the contractual text's objectivity, authority, and coherence. In order to satisfy the institutional requirements of formality and clarity, language in legal situations tends to become more abstract and technical.

4.5. Mental Process

The mental process refers to clauses that construct processes of sensing which includes perception (*see, hear*), cognition (*know, think, believe*), affection (*like, fear*), and desire (*want, wish*). In congruent forms, mental processes are typically expressed through verbal groups (e.g., *The buyer understands the terms*). However, in metaphorical forms, verbal process is realized through nominalization. Grammatical metaphor in mental process is illustrated in the following instances.

Example 8

Congruent: Party A believes that Party B has fulfilled its obligations.

Metaphorical: It is the belief of Party A that Party B has fulfilled its obligations.

In this example, the process "*believe*" is transformed into the entity "*belief*". This shift reduces subjectivity and strengthens the formality and objectivity of the text, aligning with the register of legal contracts.

5. Discussion

The research findings demonstrate that ideational metaphor serves as a central linguistic resource in the construction of English business contracts. Within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), this kind of metaphor is understood as a means by which language users express experiential meaning to achieve particular communicative purposes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In English business contracts, ideational metaphor performs a function, transforming processes into nominalized entities, thereby creating the dense, abstract, and impersonal style characteristic of a legal text. Additionally, this type of metaphor helps making the law more understandable. Furthermore, this kind enhances the contractual discourse's neutrality and professional authority. By separating legal activities from particular people, the frequent usage of abstract nominal groups stifles personal agency. By presenting the text as an independent legal entity rather than a subjective conversation between people, this linguistic detachment upholds the contractual ideal of impartiality and equality between parties. According to Tiersma (1999) and Bhatia (1993), this kind of impersonalization strengthens the

legal document's apparent objectivity and credibility. Furthermore, in addition to encoding technical information, ideational metaphor portrays institutional power and authority. By means of abstraction and condensation, it bridges the gap between linguistic representation and legal reality by converting real-world economic transactions into codified legal responsibilities.

In summary, the study confirms that grammatical metaphor, particularly in its ideational manifestation, is fundamental to the linguistic architecture of English business contracts. It enables abstraction, conciseness, and referential precision, ensuring both legal clarity and textual cohesion. These linguistic properties underscore the complex relationship between language and law, where meaning is meticulously shaped to balance precision, efficiency, and authority. Thus, grammatical metaphor emerges not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a crucial mechanism through which contractual discourse achieves its communicative and institutional goals.

6. Conclusion

The study aims to explore how ideational metaphor function within contractual discourse to construct meaning, authority, and clarity. Based on the Systemic Functional Grammar theory, ideational metaphor is a crucial language tool that allows contractual responsibilities, connections, and power systems to be textually realized. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the application of Systemic Functional Grammar in the analysis of legal and business discourse in which ideational metaphor operates in a highly specialized genre such as the business contract. In addition, the study carries several practical implications which help legal practitioners, business professionals, and translators of legal texts to both enhance clarity and coherence in drafting business contracts and avoid ambiguity while preserving formality and objectivity. Additionally, the study provides language educators and ESP instructor insights into how nominalization contributes to this genre's style.

In all cases, recognizing the role of grammatical metaphor allows professionals to engage with contractual texts not only as legal documents but also as complex communicative acts shaped by linguistic choices.

7. Limitations of the Study

Despite providing insightful knowledge, the study has a number of drawbacks that should be noted. In the first place, the corpus size was limited to 20 contracts, which might not thoroughly represent the range of business contract types used internationally. In the second place, the analysis was restricted to ideational while interpersonal and textual grammatical metaphors are excluded, which might offer further insight into mood, modality, cohesion and thematic organization. Moreover, the study focuses solely on English business contracts; thus, its findings could not be directly generalizable to contracts written in Vietnamese in order to compare and contrast business contracts in English and Vietnamese.

References

- Achugar, M., & Colombi, M. C. (2008). Systemic functional linguistic explorations into the longitudinal study of advanced capacities: The case of Spanish heritage language learners. In L. Ortega & H. Byrnes (Eds.), *The longitudinal study of advanced L2 capacities* (pp. 36-57). Routledge.
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203871652-10/systemic-functional-linguistic-explorations-longitudinal-study-advanced-capacities-case-spanish-heritage-language-learners-mariana-achugar-cecilia-colombi>

- Alhusaiyan, E. (2025). A systematic review of current trends in artificial intelligence in foreign language learning. *Saudi Journal of Language Studies*, 5(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SJLS-07-2024-0039>
- Banks, D. (2005). On the historical origins of nominalized process in scientific text. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24(3), 347-357. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2004.08.002>
- Baratta, A. M. (2010). Nominalization development across an undergraduate academic degree program. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42(4), 1017-1036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2009.08.007>
- Bhatia, V. K. (1983). Simplification v. easification: The case of legal texts. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), 42-54. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249237755_Simplification_v_Easification-The_Case_of_Legal_Texts
- Bhatia, V. K. (1993). *Analysing genre: Language use in professional settings*. Routledge. https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9781317896548_A24275662/preview-9781317896548_A24275662.pdf
- Biber, D., Gray, B., & Poonpon, K. (2011). Should we use characteristics of conversation to measure grammatical complexity in L2 writing development? *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(1), 5-35. <https://doi.org/10.5054/TQ.2011.244483>
- Candlin, C. N., Bhatia, V. K., & Jensen, C. H. (2002). Developing legal writing materials for English second language learners: Problems and perspectives. *English for Specific Purposes*, 21(4), 299-320. [http://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906\(01\)00029-1](http://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(01)00029-1)
- Colombi, C. (2006). Grammatical metaphor: Academic language development in Latino students of Spanish. In H. Byrnes (Ed.), *Advanced language learning: The contribution of Halliday and Vygotsky*, (pp. 147-163). Continuum. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313039021_Grammatical_metaphor_Academic_language_development_in_Latino_students_of_Spanish
- Devrim, D. Y. (2015). Grammatical metaphor: What do we mean? What exactly are we researching? *Functional Linguistics*, 2(1), Article 3. <http://doi.org/10.1186/s40554-015-0016-7>
- Diep, Q. B. (2005). *Vietnamese grammar*. Education Publishing House. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL31677852M/Ng%E1%BB%AF_ph%C3%A1p_t%E1%BA%BFng_Vi%E1%BB%87t
- Gia, T. T. N., & Phan, V. H. (2022). *Grammatical metaphor in poetry*. *Journal of Language and Culture Science*, 6(2). <https://vjol.info.vn/nnvh/issue/view/6737>
- Gotti, M. (2008). *Investigating specialized discourse*. Peter Lang. <https://www.peterlang.com/document/1043668>
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1966). *Grammar, society and the noun*. University College London. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL20749481M/Grammar_society_and_the_noun
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar (1st ed.)*. Edward Arnold. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/studies-in-second-language-acquisition/article/abs/an-introduction-to-functional-grammar-michael-a-k-halliday-london-edward-arnold-1985-pp-384/0B10E76178E3B17CC5418DE0E8117C32>
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar (2nd ed.)*. Edward Arnold. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL1224020M/An_introduction_to_functional_grammarHalliday
- Halliday, M. A. K. (2003). Written language, standard language, global language. *World Englishes*, 22(4), 405-418. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2003.00309.x>
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Martin, J. R. (2003). *Writing science: Literacy and discursive power*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203209936>
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. (1999). *Construing experience through meaning: A language-based approach to cognition*. Cassell. <https://aclanthology.org/J01-1007.pdf>
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. (2013). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar (4th ed.)*. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Hallidays-Introduction-to-Functional-Grammar/Halliday-Matthiessen/p/book/9781444146608>
- Hoang, V. V. (2012). *An experiential grammar of the Vietnamese clause*. Vietnam Education Publishing House. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Van-Van-Hoang/publication/334836556_An_Experiential_Grammar_of_the_Vietnamese_Clause/links/5ee9bf3a458515814a653841/An-Experiential-Grammar-of-the-Vietnamese-Clause.pdf

- Kaczmarek, K. (2013). Precision and vagueness in the language of the law in Hungarian and Polish legal texts. *Comparative Legilinguistics*, 13, 61-79. <https://doi.org/10.14746/cl.2013.13.04>
- Le, T. G. C. (2020). Semantic propositions of nominalisations as grammatical metaphor in English and Vietnamese media discourse. *Journal of Science and Technology, The University of Danang*, 18(6), 112-116. <https://doi.org/10.31130/jst-ud2020-117E>
- Martin, J. R. (1992). *English text: System and structure*. John Benjamins. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/z.59>
- Nguyen, T. N. L. (2022). Grammatical metaphor in discourse analysis of economic contracts from the perspective of systemic functional grammar. *Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Journal of Science: Social Sciences and Humanities*, 19(7), 35-45. [https://doi.org/10.54607/hcmue.js.19.7.3439\(2022\)](https://doi.org/10.54607/hcmue.js.19.7.3439(2022))
- Nguyen, V. H. (2015). Systemic functional grammar and the evaluation of “non-standard” language among today's youth from the perspective of systemic functional grammar. *Language and Life*, 1, 17-25. <https://nguvan.hnue.edu.vn/Nghi%C3%AAAn-c%E1%BB%A9u/Ng%C3%B4n-ng%E1%BB%AF/p/ngu-phap-chuc-nang-he-thong-va-danh-gia-ngon-ngu-phi-chuan-cua-gioi-tre-hien-nay-theo-quan-diem-cua-ngu-phap-chuc-nang-he-thong-867>
- Phan, V. H., & Nguyen, V. V. (2015). Applying grammatical metaphor to academic writing. *The University of Danang: Journal of Science and Technology*, 12(97), 105-108. <https://jst-ud.vn/jst-ud/article/view/3305>
- Yang, Y. (2008). Typological interpretation of differences between Chinese and English in grammatical metaphor. *Language Sciences*, 30(4), 450-478. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/223027907_Typological_interpretation_of_differences_between_Chinese_and_English_in_grammatical_metaphor
- Sirait, A., Gunawan, W., Lingga, T. R., Siswantara, Y., & Lisdawati, I. (2025). *Exploring multimodal approaches in storytelling for literacy development: A systematic literature review*. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 13(2), 713-722. <http://doi.org/10.25134/erjee.v13i2.11845>
- Tampubolon, S., & Sidabutar, U. (2025). Grammatical metaphor on the students' writing research paper: A perspective of systemic functional linguistics. *Journal of English Language and Education*, 10(1), 73-84. <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i1.627>
- Tiersma, P. M. (1999). *Legal language*. University of Chicago Press. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/L/bo3627935.html>
- Wu, X., & Cai, X. (2016). A corpus-based comparative study of ideational grammatical metaphor in marine engineering and maritime legal regulation English. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 5(5), 76-84. <http://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.5p.76>