

The Interpersonal Metafunction Analysis of Barack Obama's Inaugural Address

Houfei Yang

Abstract—Following Systemic Functional Grammar, this paper, adopting qualitative analysis as well as quantitative analysis, carries on a tentative interpersonal metafunction analysis of Barack Obama's Inaugural Address from the perspective of Interpersonal Metafunction. In the process of detailed analysis, this paper focuses on the Interpersonal roles, Mood and Modality system at the level of interpersonal function. The study finds that the plural forms of the first person are mostly used, declarative clauses have an absolute advantage, and the medium and low modal auxiliaries appear most frequently in Obama's address, which aims to help readers understand and evaluate the speech regarding its suitability, thus to provide some guidance for readers to make better speeches.

Index Terms—Inaugural address, interpersonal metafunction, interpersonal roles, modality, mood.

I. INTRODUCTION

Public speaking is a vital mean of communication, and an effective way of conveying speakers' messages to the public. Political speech is a case in point with the aim of making the political viewpoints widely known or winning support for a proposal. American Presidential Inaugural Address is a kind of political speech which is delivered by the newly-elected president on the occasion of inauguration. The new president usually proclaims the new government's national political programs and foreign policies in his inaugural address and persuades the people to accept his ideas about those new programs and policies and to show his ability of leading America to a better tomorrow. In terms of the situations, inaugural address can be defined as a unique but important discourse which is of widely influential force and profoundly significance.

Halliday (1978) states that the context of a situation is arranged in three categories: field, tenor and mode. Corresponding to that, Halliday analyzes language into three broad Metafunctions: Experiential, Interpersonal and Textual Metafunctions [1]. Each of the three Metafunctions is about a different aspect of the world and concerned with a different mode of meaning of clauses, of which, according to Halliday (1985:68), it is through the Interpersonal Metafunction that users of language establish, negotiate and assume their position in social relationships, and it is concerned with clauses as exchange [2].

Following Systemic Functional Grammar, this paper carries on a tentative interpersonal metafunction analysis of

Barack Obama's Inaugural Address from the perspective of Interpersonal Metafunction, which aims to help readers understand and evaluate the speech regarding its suitability, thus to provide some guidance for readers to make better speeches.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Systemic functional grammar (SFG) is a form of grammatical description originated by Michael Halliday. It is part of a social semiotic approach to language called systemic functional linguistics. According to Halliday (1994), the nature of language is a semiotic system [3]. This semiotic system has three meta-functions, and they are ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. According to his theory, the ideational function means the employment of language to reflect the speaker's or writer's experience that is their worlds of reality of imagination; the interpersonal function refers to the employment of language to demonstrate, build up, or maintain the relationships between people in society and the textual function gets at bringing about written or spoken texts which are cohesive in lexicon and in grammar within themselves and which are in accordance with the specific situation where they are applied by writers or speakers.

This thesis will make full use of systemic functional grammar as the theoretical framework in order to explore the realization types of the interpersonal function in political speeches.

III. THE INTERPERSONAL METAFUNCTION ANALYSIS OF BARACK OBAMA'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS

The Interpersonal Metafunction of a speech represents the way the addresser and the audience interact, the use of language to establish and maintain relations with them, to influence their behavior, to express our own viewpoint on things in the world, and to elicit or change theirs. It mainly concerns the Roles of Addressers and Audience, Mood and Modality. To help readers to understand Barack Obama's Inaugural Address and make comments on the speech about whether it is an effective discourse for its own purpose, the following analysis of the speech from the perspective of the Interpersonal Metafunction mainly involves the analysis of Mood, Modality and Pronoun[4].

A. Mood

“To keep communication going, a component is indispensable for carrying out the Interpersonal Metafunction of the clause as exchange in English. This component is called

Manuscript received August 1 2016; revised March 18, 2017.

Houfei Yang is with Dept. of Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, School of Foreign Languages, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, PRC (e-mail: yanghoufei@sina.com).

Mood and is made up of Subject and Finite.” According to Halliday (2001), there are four basic interpersonal roles when people use language, which are Giving Information, Demanding Information, Giving Goods-&-Services and Demanding Goods-&-Services [5]. In the meantime, they come into the four speech functions used to mark themselves—they are Statement, Question, Offer and Demand. Language uses the giving and demanding roles to signify its intention when communication is taking place, at the same time the purpose of giving and demanding commodity or information is also expressed. The following Table I can show it:

TABLE I: BASIC INTERPERSONAL ROLES

Commodity Exchange	Goods-&-services	Information
Giving	Offer	Statement
	I'll give you the book.	They have left.
Deamanding	Command	Question
	Close your eyes.	Is that her book?

In which, the function of statement is closely associated with particular grammatical structure, that is, the declarative clauses; Question is related to interrogative clauses; and Command is associated with imperative clauses. The ordering of Subject and Finite (two elements of the Mood system of the clause) in the clause plays an indispensable role in signaling speech roles in that it can show whether the clause is indicative or imperative. The following is the analysis of mood system in Obama’s inaugural address. There’re 107 sentences in this address, which can fall into 265 clauses. Here goes a Table II:

TABLE II: NUMBERS OF THREE MOODS STRUCTURES IN OBAMA’S INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Mood	structure	Clause
Declarative	257	97%
Imperative	8	3%
Interrogative	0	0%
Total	number	265

Table II shows that the declarative takes prominent priority over the others and the imperative has taken the rest place. There’s no room available to the interrogative.

The purpose of a speech is to express the addresser’s viewpoint on things in the world, to elicit or change the audience’s attitudes and to arouse the audiences’ passion to share the same proposal of the addresser. Particularly in a political speech, as a dilly carrying on a political mission, it is vital and apparent for the addresser to give information and demand services. On one hand, the addresser hopes to offer certain messages to the audience showing his political attitude and assumption. On the other hand, he tries to demand and arouse the audience to take action to follow his instruction. Therefore, complete declarative clauses generally dominate in a political speech; imperative clauses come next to them; and interrogative clauses are the last choices for the reason that they may make a speech less solemn, less convincing and persuasive. With the above regard, the dominant appearances of 257 declarative clauses in Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address are successful in that they are functioned as

statements to give as much as possible information to the audience, with which he succeeded in recalling his presidential election campaign, expressing his gratitude to his supporters, making promises and inspiring the audience to go through the difficulties with the whole nation.

Imperative clause also plays an important role in a speech in that it can appeal the audience to follow the addresser’s instruction; in that it can also help to build up the authority of the addresser. While in a speech, it is more significant for the addresser to build up an equal and mutual reliant relationship with the audience. Even though we mentioned above that the function of command is closely associated with imperative clauses, while Halliday states that the two kinds of messages conveyed by imperative clauses are: one is to command others to do something, the other is to invite the audience to do something together. The latter is always effected by the format of “Let’s”. See the following examples:

(1) “So let us mark this day with remembrance of who we are and how far we have traveled.”

(2) “...let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come.”

The examples above seem like that the president feel the people’s hearts in his own and will go with the people hand in hand to accomplish their mission. It may move the audience more so as to win their supporting and endorsing.

B. Modality

Halliday (2000) states that modality also plays an important role in carrying out the interpersonal metafunction of clauses showing to what degree the proposition is valid [6]. Modality refers to the space between “yes” and “no”, showing the speaker’s judgments of the probabilities or the obligations involved in what she is saying. According to Thompson (2000:57), modality consists of modalisation and modulation [7]. The former relates to the speaker’s judgment of the validity of the proposition, and covers the scale of in terms of probability (possible-probable-certain) and usuality (sometimes-usually-always). The latter relates to how confident the speaker can be in the eventual success of the exchange, and it includes the degree of obligation (allowed-supposed-required) and the inclination (willing-keen-determined).

Modality can be realized by both paralinguistic and linguistic tools. The paralinguistic tool refers to body language, voice and so on, and the linguistic tool refers to the application of modal auxiliary, modal adjuncts and passive verbs. As this paper is concerned on the discourse analysis, the following mainly analyzes some basic linguistic tools used by Obama in his inaugural address, which is modal auxiliary. Because the modal auxiliaries, such as must, should, can, will and so forth, make sentences or clauses take the meaning of possibility, necessity or obligation, the proper employment of them brings the slight difference to the meanings in communication. It is helpful for the addresser to generate favorable attitudes towards the audience and to gain the audience’s acceptance of his options. The modal auxiliaries which occur in this address are “will”, “can(could)”, “must”, “would”, “should”, “may(might)” and “shall”. The total number of them is 56. The detail use of them respectively is shown in the following Table III:

TABLE III: NUMBERS OF VARIOUS MODAL AUXILIARIES IN OBAMA'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Modal Aux. Number	will	Can (could)	must	would	should	may (might)	shall
occurrence	19	19+1	8	1	0	3+2	3
Total	56	56	56	56	56	56	56

By statistics, 56 modal verbal operators are adopted in Barack Obama's Inaugural Address, of which, the most frequently adopted ones are as the following: "can(could)" turns up for 20 times; "will" is adopted for 19 times, "must" turns up for 8 times; "would", "should", "may(might)", "shall" far lag behind the top three.

In this address, "will" is frequently applied to express Obama's intensions and plans in his future executing the authority as the president. Take for example,

(3) "And we will act, not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth. We will build the roads and bridges, the electric grids and digital lines that feed our commerce and bind us together. We'll restore science to its rightful place, and wield technology's wonders to raise health care's quality and lower its cost. We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories. And we will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age. All this we can do. All this we will do."

As is mentioned above, different scales of modal commitment lead to different meanings. "Will", which represents a higher scale of modal commitment; signals a higher degree of certainty about the validity of a proposition. Thus the constant use of "will" in the data is successful in showing Barack Obama's strong mind and keen desire to lead American to go through the difficulties. Meanwhile, the higher modal commitment of "will" further confirms that more actions will be definitely taken in the future.

(4) "For as much as government can do, and must do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies."

(5) "Our Founding Fathers, faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man."

Obama uses "can" to weaken his authority, to shorten the distance between him and the audience and not to force and command them to follow his instruction. On the other hand, the semantic meaning of "can" is "have the ability to do something" [8]. The constant applications of "can" here is to encourage American to believe in themselves to be confident that they have the ability to do anything, telling the nation that even though the country was probably in its darkest days, there was hope; there was a chance to turn it around and climb back into the light.

The modal auxiliary "must" always stands for the obligation and conjecture. It is a modal auxiliary of high value, which is provided, more often than not, with strong emotionalism. Obama uses it for the purpose of arousing the audience's sense of responsibility for their country. In the following examples we can find it,

(6) "So it has been; so it must be with this generation of Americans."

(7) "For the world has changed, and we must change with it."

Here, "must" helps to show Barack Obama's firm determination to overcome the difficulties and call on the American to take strong actions to achieve their target.

C. Personal Pronoun

According to Li (2002), personal pronouns have the interpersonal function in discourse [9]. That is because they establish a certain relationship between the addresser and the audience in a speech. Thus, Personal pronouns are viewed as another way of carrying interpersonal meaning apart from Mood and Modality. Generally, the first personal pronoun "I" and "we" refer to the addresser, the second personal pronoun "you" refers to the person(s) spoken to. And the application of personal pronouns in Barack Obama's Victory Speech can be shown clearly in the following Table IV.

TABLE IV: NUMBER OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN OBAMA'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Personal pronouns	Numbers of occurrence
I (my, me)	5
we (our, ourselves, us)	157
you (your)	17
he/she (his, him, her)	2
they (their, them, themselves)	26

From the above Figure, we can see that the first personal pronoun takes up 78%, of which the plural form "we" and its anamorphous "us" and "our" occupy 60%; the first single personal pronoun "I" takes up 2%. Whereas the second personal pronoun "you" occupies 8% and the third personal pronoun comes next to it.

Addresser can "express the subtle interpersonal significance" by means of these pronouns, it also can "help adjust and manipulate the interactive relationship between addresser and audience" (Li Zhanzi, 2004: 128). This thesis will take all these personal pronouns into the study, aiming at exploring how these pronouns are used in political speeches to establish relations. The following part is an analysis of the personal pronouns used by Obama in his first inaugural address.

1) The first person used in Obama's inaugural address

From the table above, it is obvious that "we(our, ourselves, us)" is most frequently used in the address.

(8) We are, and always will be, the united states of American.

(9) It's the answer that led those who've been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.

(10) To those -- to those who would tear the world down:
We will defeat you. To those who seek peace and security:
We support you.

(11) "And we will act, not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth. We will build the roads and bridges, the electric grids and digital lines that feed our commerce and bind us together."

The 157 times appearance has its defining purpose that Obama, as the president, is ready to work as a member of the people to share the happiness and bitterness with them when the crisis is around Americans. His political motives are, in fact, to convince the people that he will be in the same boat with them so as to get closer to the people. In this case, Obama can find a conjunction point between political power and power control by the means of soul smoothing in order to unite the people and to get the recognition of the people.

(12) To my sister Maya, my sister Alma, all my other brothers and sisters, thank you so much for all the support that you've given me. I am grateful to them.

(13) "Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real".

(14) To the best campaign team ever assembled in the history of politics you made this happen, and I am forever grateful for what you've sacrificed to get it done.

The use of "I(my, me)" in the address has appeared not so much. In a general way, "I (my, me)" seldom comes out in an inaugural address, for it seems to be too exclusive. The political goal of an inaugural address mostly is to make the addresser be a part of the people. However, when it is necessary for the addresser to show his strong position and to highlight his existence, the "I(my, me)" can find its place.

2) *The second person used in Obama's inaugural address*

With reference to the second personal pronoun "you", Zheng Cheng (2001) states that "you" can make a significant role in the speech, because it can help to create a dialogic style in the speech, maintaining a close intimate relation between the addresser and the audience, and thus to ensure the effective interaction of the addresser and the audience in a speech [10]. The above mentioned can be seen in the following sentence:

(15) "And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken — you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you, we can tell it."

(16) "And I know you didn't do this just to win an election. And I know you didn't do it for me. You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead."

"In any discourse, the sense of "you(your)" is that it stresses on the existence of audience to make the speech more mutual-dynamical and more communicative" [11]. What's interesting in Obama's address, nevertheless, is that it is a bit little different in the way of using "you(your)", which refers to the skeptics inward, the traditional enemy abroad and "the people of poor nations". Then, the direction and the reference are more explicit. And the addresser's resolution appears more violent to the American people.

3) *The third person used in Obama's inaugural address*

There is nothing particularly noteworthy in the way of using "he/she (his, him, her)" in this address. "She" and "he"

are the third personal pronouns, and the distance between the speaker and the listeners are farther than "we" and "you".

(17) "I thank President Bush for his service to our nation as well as the generosity and cooperation he has shown throughout this transition."

The singular form in third personal pronoun rarely occurs in an inaugural address, since it does not live up to the requirement of a political address, which is to arouse the people's enthusiasm. The "he/she(his, him, her)" seems too absolutely exclusive.

The personal pronoun "they (their, them, themselves)" is of somewhat exclusive. The addresser's aim of it is always to keep himself a distance with his reference. But sometimes it depends. For example, in Obama's inaugural address,

(18) "We honor them not only because they are the guardians of our liberty, but because they embody the spirit of service—a willingness to find meaning in something greater than themselves".

Here "they(their, them, themselves)" is the pioneers of America. So we can see that the use of it relies on the addresser's attitude and the need of a discourse. In most cases, it is put on its place where it is supposed to be.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper, an important category of political speech—Presidential Inaugural Address is employed as the subject of study. And Obama's presidential inaugural address in particular is taken as an example to make discourse analysis for revealing the discourse features. The whole process of the analysis revolves around Halliday's theory of Systemic-functional Grammar.

In summary, the research so far shows that, from the perspective of the Interpersonal Metafunction, positive declarative clauses dominate Barack Obama's Inaugural Address; imperative clauses are in the second position; "will", "can" and "must" turn up frequently as modal verbal operators to carry on the modality in the speech; the first personal pronoun and its anamorphous turn up mostly in Barack Obama's Inaugural Address, the second personal pronoun "you" come next. This paper can provide some guidance for readers to make better speeches as follows: (1) Positive declarative clauses are recommended to convey as many as possible messages to the audience and convince the audience with fact; appropriate application of imperative clauses are useful in making persuasion and suggestion. (2) Modal verbal operators with higher or highest modal commitment can show the addresser's firm determination to finish the task, and "can" is helpful to encourage the audience to have confidence in their ability. (3) Choosing "We" to be the personal pronoun and applying "we"- "you" — "we" pattern can help to create an intimate dialogic style and shorten the distance between the addresser and the audience, which can further persuade the audience to share the same proposal of the addresser.

REFERENCES

- [1] M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: the Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*, London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1978.

- [2] M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1985.
- [3] M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1994.
- [4] W. Ruize, *Selected Speeches of Barack Obama*, Beijing: Yi Lin Press, 2011.
- [5] M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001.
- [6] M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000.
- [7] G. Thompson, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000.
- [8] X. Wang and Y. Hu, "Interpersonal function of discourse analysis in speech — Taking Barack Obama 's presidential speeches as an example," *Language and Literature Studies*, no. 6, pp. 31-33, 2009.
- [9] Z. Li, *Study on the Interpersonal Meaning of Discourse*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2004.
- [10] C. Zheng, "A study of president Obama's inaugural address," *Scientific Abstracts*, 2001.
- [11] Z. Hu, Y. Zhu, and D. Zhang, *A Survey of Systemic Functional Grammar*, Changsha: Hunan Education Press, 1989.



Houfei Yang was born on February 4, 1992, in Linyi City, Shandong Province, China. She has obtained the bachelor of English degree at Northwestern Polytechnical University (NWPU) of China in July, 2014 and is in the second year of master degree in the field of foreign linguistics and applied linguistics.

She has rich internship experience, such as working as a technical director at Language Service Center of NWPU, administrative assistant, manager of Original Writing Team, and volunteering English teacher.

Her paper titled *Fitness behavior of teachers in universities of Qinghai* was published in Feb. 2013. She has issued many articles on website or in newspaper. She is keen on applied linguistics .

Yang established an original writing team for creating novel articles and poems in NWPU and won kinds of prizes.