# An Analysis of the Interpersonal Function of Joe Biden's Inaugural Speech

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*Abstract*—Interpersonal function of language was first put forward by Halliday and it has been added by some scholars, which is one of the three meta-functions of language. It helps us establish and maintain social relationships. This paper analyzes the inaugural speech of Joe Biden based on interpersonal function and conducts both a quantitative approach and a qualitative approach. This research has found: In personal pronoun system, Biden used the first person pronoun most frequently in his inaugural speech. In modality system, medium-value modal verbs were used most, followed by low-value modal verbs and high-value modal verbs. In mood system, declarative sentences were used most often, which made his speech more objective and reasonable. In tense system, present tense appears most often in the speech, followed by future tense and past tense. In evaluation system, different resources have helped to achieve the interpersonal function.

*Index Terms*—Interpersonal function, systemic functional grammar, political speech

## I. INTRODUCTION

Public speech has always been widely studied by many scholars of various disciplines around the world, for it is influential and powerful. Different people may have their different purposes to conduct a public speech. However, they cannot avoid contacting with his or her audience through their speech. Thus, the interpersonal function of public speech is extremely obvious. There are different types of public speeches according to different criteria. According to their general purposes, public speeches fall into three categories: informative, entertaining and persuasive. In terms of formality, speeches can be formal and informal. As far as the channel is concerned, there are impromptu speeches, extemporaneous speeches, and speeches written to be spoken.

Politicians' speeches are often identified as persuasive speech, for their intention of speech often serve for their political ambitions [1]. Moreover, political speech has a wide range of audience. As one of the most powerful figures in the world, American president's speeches enjoy enormous influence in the world, attracting much attention. Therefore, the president's speech must be carefully elaborated. Especially, the inaugural speeches of the presidents are always widely reported and analyzed. Different groups of people may have their own interpretations. Moreover, as the social conflicts become more severe, Joe Biden's inaugural speech is viewed as an opportunity to unite the American society and provides himself a sound environment to govern America. Thus, his inaugural speech is worth analyzing from the perspective of interpersonal function of language.

## II. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

According to Halliday's conceptual framework of Systemic-Functional Grammar; language is viewed as a semiotic system. This system is sustained by a network of interrelated and mufti-layered systems of options in meaning. In this sense, text is a semantic entity, which is a functional configuration of choice of meaning. Thus, a discourse grammar indeed should be functional and semantic in its orientation, with the grammatical structures explained as the realization of semantic patterns. In Systemic-Functional Grammar, function equals meaning [2].

In daily life, people communicate with each other by using language to talk around them, along with which they are interacting with each other, and thus establish and maintain certain social relationships between them [2]. People describe the world in their own eyes and in a very personal way which cannot be a hundred percent reflection of the real world. Thus the speaker's viewpoints on things inevitably make subjective attitudes and judgments but they are trying to influence and change others' viewpoints about certain things.

Such is the interpersonal function. Therefore, interpersonal function represents the speaker's meaning potential as an intruder, carrying a heavy semantic load. It encompasses the dynamics of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, and the use of language to express one's attitude and to influence the attitudes or behavior of the hearer [3]. According to Halliday, the clause is organized as an interactive event involving speaker or writer, and audience. Halliday [3] proposes that the interpersonal function carries a heavy semantic load and he focuses on mood and modality as the main lexicon-grammatical systems to realize the interpersonal function. He mentions the existence of other means of interpersonal function, namely, in the person system, in the attitudinal type of epithet, in the connotative meanings of lexical items, in prosodic features such as swearing words and voice quality [4]. Halliday does realize the other resources of the interpersonal function, but he does not mention them in a detailed way.

## III. RESEARCH METHOD

This research takes the perspective of systemic functional grammar, mainly based on the interpersonal function of language put forward by Halliday with some extension theories of other scholars. This research adapts both a

quantitative approach and qualitative approach. The quantitative study exhibits distribution of the mood; modality; personal pronoun and tense with the help of the corpus tool "Antconc" and "Lancbox". The evaluation study is conducted using "UAM too". For qualitative study, this research analyzes some samples randomly selected from the perspective of interpersonal function of language.

## IV. SYSTEMS

### A. Personal Pronoun System

Personal pronoun system is an important embodiment of the interpersonal function of discourse. The choice of personal pronoun affects the intimacy between the speaker and the audience. The author's choice of personal pronoun in a particular text reveals his attitude towards the audience and his intimate relationship with the audience. The personal pronoun system mainly consists of the first person (I, we, our), the second person (you, your) and the third person (he, she, it, they). In this paper, corpus tool " AntConc" is used to conduct a statistical study on personal pronouns in the whole text. Table I shows the usage of personal pronouns.

TABLE I: FREQUENCIES OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS

|  | First | Second | Third | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | 186 | 18 | 21 | 225 |
| Percentage | 83% | 8% | 9% | 100 |

As can be seen from Table I, Biden used the first person most frequently in his inaugural speech, and the second person and the third person were seldom used. The use of the first person can shorten the distance with the reader, and make the audience to easily accept what he said. "We" is the most frequently used personal pronoun, with 91 occurrences in total.

Sample 1 With Unity, we can do Great Things for example,

Sample 2 When he put pen to paper, the President said, "If my name ever goes down into history it will be for this act and my whole soul is in it,"

In Sample 1, Biden used the first-person "we" instead of the second-person "You." Through the use of "We", the audience is placed in the context of its grand goals, which require joint efforts and the unity of "We". The use of "We" alleviates the sharp contradictions between the audience and Biden, such as class difference, power distance and racial difference, and makes the audience ignore the challenges of various contradictions existing in the American society. The second and third person often make people think of unfamiliarity and difference. In this speech, the occurrence of the second person and the third person is less, which indicates that Biden intended to ease social conflicts and unite the American society in his inaugural speech. In Sample 2, the only "he" in this speech occurs, when Biden quoted Lincoln's words and appealed to the audience to defend the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and compared himself to Abraham Lincoln in an attempt to bring Americans together.

### B. Modality System

Modality system is one of the important components of interpersonal meaning. It is the speaker's judgment on the success and validity of the proposition he speaks, or the obligation he requires the other party to undertake in the command, or the personal will he wants to express in the proposal. This part of interpersonal meaning is realized by the modal system of grammar". Modality is implemented in a number of ways. Halliday believes that modality is generally expressed in the following ways: finite modal operator, Mood Adjunct, adjective predictor, nominal equivalent, etc. This article explores modal verbs in Biden's inaugural speech. Table II is the classification of modal verbs in this paper according to Halliday's criterion of values of modal verbs. Table III is frequencies of modal verbs.

TABLE II: VALUES OF MODAL VERBS

| High | Medium | Low |
|---|---|---|
| have to; must | Will; shall; would; should; ought to | Can; could; may; might |

TABLE III: FREQUENCIES OF MODAL VERBS

|  | High | Medium | Low | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | 13 | 56 | 21 | 90 |
| Percentage | 15% | 62% | 23% | 100 |

As shown in Table III, in Biden's inaugural speech, medium-value modal verbs appear most often, accounting for 62%. Low value modal verbs came next, accounting for 23%. The frequency of high-value modal verbs appears least, accounting for only 15%. Medium-value modal verbs sounds calmer, persuasive but not so aggressive, which are consistent with Biden's policy philosophy as the "establishment camp" of the Democratic Party, and also consistent with the purpose of his inaugural speech to ease social contradictions in the United States and unite the American people.

Sample 3 I will defend the Constitution.
I will defend our democracy.
I will defend America.
I will give my all in your service thinking not of power,
but of possibilities.

In Sample 3, he showed his determination, but avoided provoking the audience to think that the constitution and democracy of the United States are under threat. High-value modal verbs are least used because they give audience a sense of aggression, which are inconsistent with Biden's political philosophy.

### C. Mood System

The mood system consists of subject and infinitive components, and their different ordering forms different clause types, namely declarative, interrogative and imperative, from which declarative, interrogative and imperative moods are produced. Table IV shows the frequencies of mood in Biden's inaugural speech.

As Table IV shows, Biden mainly used declarative sentences in his inaugural speech, which appear 194 times and account for 93%. Interrogative and imperative sentences were rarely used, accounting for only 3% and 4% respectively. This is consistent with the purpose of his inaugural speech, which aims to instill his political ideas into the audience by using a large number of statements to objectively describe the current situation of American society and publish his political ideas.

TABLE IV: FREQUENCIES OF MOOD

|  | Declarative | Interrogative | Imperative | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | 194 | 6 | 9 | 209 |
| Percentage | 93% | 3% | 4% | 100 |

Sample 4  Millions of jobs have been lost.
Hundreds of thousands of businesses closed

Sample 5  Let us listen to one another.

Sample 6  Will we rise to the occasion?
Will we master this rare and difficult hour?
Will we meet our obligations and pass along a new and better world for our children?
I believe we must and I believe we will.

In Sample 4, he used declarative sentences to describe the decline of the American economy and try to arouse the audience's response. Most of the imperative sentences in the article began with "Let us", narrowing the distance between Biden and the audience, and playing a role of calling for the unity of Americans from all walks of life. In Sample 5, people are urged to listen to each other. The use of interrogative questions in the article strengthens the tone and enhances the interaction with the audience. In Sample 6, he used three interrogative sentences to strengthen the mood.

### D. Tense System

In systemic functional grammar, tense is recognized as a property of process to realize the meta-function of language, which is closely related to the grammatical category of modality. Thompson [5] points out that finite relates the proposition either to the here-and-now reality of the speech event (tense) or to the speech's attitude (modality), and suggests that tense and modality were alternative forms of reference. Thus, this section discusses the tense distribution in the inaugural speech of Joe Biden and analyses how the interpersonal function is realized based on the tense system. Table V is the tense distribution in Joe Biden's inaugural speech.

TABLE V: FREQUENCIES OF TENSE

|  | Future | Present | Past | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | 35 | 138 | 23 | 196 |
| Percentage | 20% | 70% | 10% | 100 |

As is shown in Table V, present tense appears most often in the speech, followed by future tense and past tense. Present tense is used to convey the information of current situation. In Biden's speech, present tense is used to describe the social issue in the USA and try to make the audience aware of the urgency of unity.

Sample 7 We face an attack on democracy and on truth. Sample 8 We are entering what may well be the toughest and deadliest period of the virus.

Sample 9 Here are some days when we need a hand.

In Sample 7, he used present tense to show that the crisis of American democracy and truth, making the audience realize the significance of his political success. In Sample 8, he emphasized on the severe situation of the covid-19 pandemic in the USA, intensifying the audience's zeal to obey the pandemic prevention policies he put forward. In sample 9, he used present tense to show the significance of uniting and helping each other during this hard time.

Future tense accounts for 18% of the tense used in the inaugural speech, ranks second in the tense system. Future tense mainly expresses something planned or expected in the future. In Biden's inaugural speech, the future tense is mainly used to show his ambition, promises and the expected results through his administration.

Sample 10 We will be a strong and trusted partner for peace, progress, and security.

Sample 11 And when we do, we will write the next chapter in the American story.

Sample 12 We will need all our strength to persevere through this dark winter.

In Sample 10, he used the future tense to describe an ideal partner that the USA will be to its allies to try to repair the relationships between the USA and its allies, which were once got worse under the administration of Donald Trump. In Sample 11, he promised the audience an attractive future of the UAS when they follow his path. In Sample 12, he used the future tense to stress on the significance of unity for a bright future.

In this speech, past tense only appears 23 times, which is the least used tense compared with present tense and future tense. Past tense is often used to talk about something that has already happened. In Biden's speech, he uses past tense mainly recalls the difficult times and the brilliant figures and successful moments in the history of the USA.

Sample 13 Hundreds of thousands of businesses closed.

Sample 14 Here we stand looking out to the great Mall where Dr. King spoke of his dream.

Sample 15 Here we stand, where 108 years ago at another inaugural, thousands of protesters tried to block brave women from marching for the right to vote

In Sample 13, he recalls a hard time during World War II. In Sample 14, he recalls the famous speech delivered by Dr. King, which was in contrast with the racism in current American society. Thus, it makes people realize the urgency of solving racial hatreds and conflicts. In Sample 15, he recalls the movement for women right, showing his support for women right and getting support from feminists.

### E. Evaluation System

Zhan-Zi [6] mentions that the speaker uses Evaluations to make judgment and express their feelings. Based on Halliday's theory, Martin [7] developed Evaluation which focuses on lexicon into a systemic theory, called Appraisal System in which the three parts of Attitude, Engagement and Graduation constitute are main sub-systems of it. In the following study, Appraisal System will be presented from these three parts separately.

*1) Attitude system*

Attitude refers to the judgment and appreciation of human behavior, text/process and phenomena once upon the psychological condition is influenced positively or negatively [8]. Attitude consists of three secondary systems: affection, judgment and appreciation, among which affection plays a crucial role [9].

Sample 16 My fellow Americans, we have to be different than this.

Sample 17 We can see each other not as adversaries but as neighbors.
We can treat each other with dignity and respect.

We can join forces, stop the shouting, and lower the temperature.

For without unity, there is no peace, only bitterness and fury.

In Sample 16, he uses "fellow American" to call the audience, it shows abundant positive affection and can make Biden and the audience's relationship closer. Thus, it will make his proposals easier to be accepted. In Sample 17, he uses many words like "peace/ bitterness and fury" to show the importance of unity. He uses "adversaries and neighbors" as a contrast to call on the good relationships among different communities.

*2) Engagement system*

Engagement is a way of the speaker/author taking part in a conversation. They show their obligations and responsibilities when engagement is gotten involved. Engagement is realized by monogloss and heterogloss [10].

Sample 18   In another January in Washington, on New Year's Day 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

When he put pen to paper, the President said, "If my name ever goes down into history it will be for this act and my whole soul is in it."

My whole soul is in it.

In Sample 18, Biden recalled the words Lincoln said when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. By quoting Lincoln's words, the president intends to demonstrate his resolution to defend the spirit of the Emancipation Proclamation. As a respected politician, Lincoln's words are accepted by more communities in America.

*3) Graduation system*

The Graduation system is a subsystem that can deal with resources which are not scalable like attitude or engagement resources and runs through the whole appraisal system [11]. It regulates the authorial voices by different degrees of description, including the strength and quantity of attitude.

Sample 19 My fellow Americans, we have to be different than this.

America has to be better than this.

And, I believe America is better than this.

Sample 20 To those 400,000 fellow Americans — mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, friends, neighbors, and co-workers.

In Sample 19, he uses "better" to show that America in his eyes should not be like this. There must be some change to make America better and it ought to be better. He has the confidence to make America better. In Sample 20, he used the number of American population to call them as a whole, which will strengthen the sense of unity and make the audience more inclined to accept his proposals.

## V. Conclusion

Based on the interpersonal function theory proposed by Halliday, this paper conducts a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the inaugural speech of US President Joe Biden through the personal pronoun system, the modality system, the mood system and tense system. This study has found that in the personal system, the extensive use of the first person brings the distance between the speaker and the audience closer. In the modality system, the frequent use of medium-value modal verbs makes the speaker's tone moderate and more acceptable to the audience. In the tone system, the large number of declarative sentences makes the speech more objective. In the tense system, the use of present tense makes the audience focus on the current situation in the USA. From the perspective of interpersonal function, Biden's inaugural speech has achieved its purpose of easing the contradictions in American society and uniting the American people. In the evaluation system, the use of different resources has fulfilled his speech intention.

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