

Interpersonal Function Analysis of Political Speech

Yitong Zhu, Hongqiang Liu, Yitong Zang

School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou, China

Keywords: Interpersonal function, personal pronoun, modality, political speech

Abstract: This paper analyzes political speech texts from the perspective of systemic functional grammar. Through the exploration of the personal pronouns and modality in the speech draft, it reveals how the speaker uses speech to establish his own authority, but also to eliminate the strangeness with the public, and gain their approval and support. The study found that, in their speeches, speakers frequently employ the first-person subject “we” to cut down the distance between themselves and the audiences; they use the second-person subject “you” to improve the impact of their speeches and inspire the audience; they use the third-person subject “they” to highlight their political leadership position. In addition, median-value modal verbs are used the most frequently and low-value modal verbs are used the least in the text, so as to form a reasonable modal to reflect the national will.

1. Introduction

As the world landscape continues to change today, people are more sensitive to political speeches. Because from political speeches we can learn not only the social culture and historical background of a country, but also the political attitudes of the speakers and even the countries they represent. The most important feature of political speeches is its strong connection to power. Therefore, the analysis of the language of political speeches is of great importance to our understanding of political speeches. Inaugural speeches are a kind of political speeches.

Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar considered there are three meta-functions of language: conceptual function, interpersonal function, and textual function^[1]. The interpersonal function is a crucial social function of language, which means that people can use language to contact with other people, to establish and hold interpersonal relationships, to affect others' behavior, and to express their perspective of the world. Through this function, speakers can achieve interaction with others. In fact, in our daily life, language is not only used for communication but also used for speakers' formal political speeches. By using different words, the speaker tries to convince the audience and establish a harmonious relationship with them in order to gain their support. Based on systemic functional grammar, this paper analyzes the material of Biden's inaugural speech in order to probe into how he achieved his purpose of interpersonal function meaning on his speech from the view of personal pronouns and modality.

2. Literature Review

Halliday proposed that functional grammar is composed of three major meta-functions, which are conceptual function, interpersonal function, and textual function. Among them, the interpersonal

function has been broadly used in the analysis of political speeches. For example, Wang Xiaochen analyzed the inauguration speech texts of U.S. President Donald Trump and former British Prime Minister Theresa May in terms of the person system, the mood system and the tone system in comparison. He believed that both of them are good at expressing their will and establishing authority in the first person, shortening the interpersonal distance with the help of medium-weight modal verbs, and using more declarative tones to express their opinions and win public support. However, Trump's self-awareness is stronger^[2]. Zheng Dongsheng interpreted Bush's speeches during his tenure in terms of personal pronoun and modal systems, and concluded that Bush used different linguistic devices to clarify the rationality and legality of what he did, and effectively conveyed his beliefs and attitudes to the public, thus influencing their perceptions and attitudes and accepting his internal and external policies. He Yongmeianalyzed the modal verbs in English political speeches and summarized the distribution of their modal values^[3]. In addition, Jiang Xue analyzed Obama's election victory speech in terms of the transitivity system, the modality system and the normalization system. Obama used the first-person subject to close the distance between himself and his audience, the third-person subject to highlight his political leadership position, and the reasonable modality to reflect the national will. To sum up, there has been some research practice in using interpersonal functions to analyze political speech texts. Therefore, this paper analyzes President Joe Biden's inaugural speech from two aspects: personal pronoun and modality.

3. Interpersonal Function Realized by Personal Pronouns

Personal pronoun is a very important pragmatic strategy, and speakers can achieve their interpersonal meaning by choosing diverse personal pronouns. In political speech, the contact, which between the speakers and their audiences, can reflect the personal meaning to the maximum extent. The speaker's standpoint is often reflected by the diverse option of personal pronouns, which mainly depends on the speaker's social status, communicative intentions and his understanding and perception of social reality^[4].

3.1 "We" and Its Interpersonal Function

We can right wrongs. We can put people to work in good jobs. We can teach our children in safe schools. We can overcome the deadly virus.

And we must reject the culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured.

When the speaker wants to express a strong will, by using "we", he puts himself in the same position as his audience, so that the content of the speech affects his audience implicitly, and also expressing his will forcefully at the same time. In Biden's inaugural speech, a total of 270 personal pronouns were included, of which "we" had 164, accounting for 60.74%. Here, "we" refers to Biden and his administration officials, as well as all citizens of the United States.

Biden's use of "we" softened something obligatory and succeeded in imposing his own will on his listeners. Through the use of "we", Biden gives the listener the impression that they are included in "we", making them feel like they are in the same position as him, minimizing the distance between them, reducing the tone of imperative speech to make the reader more participation in the speech, showing the purpose of unity.

3.2 "You" and Its Interpersonal Function

And, we must meet this moment as the United States of America. If we do that, I guarantee you, we will not fail.

Look, you all know we've been through so much in this nation.

The “you” in Biden’s inaugural speech appeared 25 times, accounting for about 9.26%. The “you” here refers to an American citizen. Biden said that as the president of the United States, he will do his best to make the American people happy. The use of “you” seems to turn a one-to-many speech into a one-on-one conversation, making democracy more receptive to his point of view. Biden shifted the focus of the topic directly to the audience, which greatly increased the audience’s sense of presence and also improved the impact of the speech, bringing it closer to the people and serving as an inspiration to the audience. It also achieves the goal of fully capturing the attention of potential listeners and expressing the speaker's encouragement.

3.3 “They” and Its Interpersonal Function

I know speaking of unity can sound to some like a foolish fantasy these days. I know the forces that divide us are deep and they are real.

And here we stand, just days after a riotous mob thought they could use violence to silence the will of the people, to stop the work of our democracy, to drive us from this sacred ground.

In political speeches, speakers are also likely to use third-person pronouns as the subject of sentences. In Biden’s inauguration speech, “they” appeared 21 times, accounting for about 7.78% of the total, which is a relatively low frequency of use. Because “they” in the speech often refers to those who do not appear in the speech. In examples 5 and 6, Biden uses “they” to represent Americans who are trying to divide America and American thugs who are creating unrest. At this point, Biden’s purpose is to show his authority, and at that point he is more concerned with the objectivity of his speech than with maintaining an equal relationship with his audience, that is his words appear more formal and authoritative. On the one hand, he wants to establish his authoritative position, and on the other hand, he wants to establish a good relationship with his audience.

As can be seen from the above, the use of personal pronouns is intended to achieve the purpose of drawing the attention of the audiences and to reinforce the links between the speakers and their audiences. Through the choose of pronouns such as “we”, “you” and “they” throughout the speech, Biden maintained his position as the vital principal of the United States, established his power and authority, and at the same time brought him closer to his audience, making them believe that Biden exists among the ordinary. What analyzed above indicates that the conscious control of the choose of personal pronouns is of great consequence to to the realization of the interpersonal function in political speeches.

4. Interpersonal Function Realized by Modality

The interpersonal function is not only reflected in personal pronouns but also in modality. Modality, a syntactic-semantic category, reflects the speaker’s subjective perspectives to the content of the speech. Modalities can clearly express both positive and negative meanings, which means that usually speakers can use different modals to express different attitudes and thus achieve different purposes. Power is a distinctive feature of political speeches. The speaker usually appears as an authority and imposes his will on the listener^[5]. One of the ways is to use modal auxiliary verbs in speech to achieve different interpersonal meanings^[6].

| Value of Modality | Frequency | Modal Verbs |
|-------------------|------------|----------------------------|
| Low | 29 (35.8%) | can, may, could, might |
| Median | 42 (51.9%) | will, shall, would, should |
| High | 10 (12.3%) | must, have to |

The table shows that in Biden’s inauguration speech, the frequently occurring modal verbs have different value types: “can”, “may”, “could”, “might” are low-value modal verbs; “will”, “shall”, “would”, “will”, “shall”, “would”, “should” are median-value modal verbs; “must”, “have to” are high-value modal verbs. The low-value modal verbs were used 29 times, accounting for 35.8%; the median-value modal verbs were used 42 times, accounting for 51.9%; and the high-value modal verbs were used 10 times, accounting for 12.3%.

4.1 The Low-value Modal Verbs

We need all our strength to persevere through this dark winter. We are entering what may be the toughest and deadliest period of the virus.

We can treat each other with dignity and respect. We can join forces, stop the shouting, and lower the temperature.

The modal auxiliary verb “may” means possible, perhaps, indicating that a situation is possible. It is often used to measure what might happen. It indicates an inference because it describes something that cannot be directly observed from the outside. In most political speeches, the use of “may” indicates that the speaker wants to draw hope from the listener, putting the speaker in a position of authority to predict the future. In Example 8, Biden uses “may” to say that Americans need to unite so that they can work together to get through the tough times of the epidemic.

In addition, the meaning of “can” overlaps with “may” to a certain extent, and when it is not synonymous with “may”, it can also be used for “permission” or be used to describe ability. In Example 9, Biden said that they can join forces and be friends rather than enemies, treating each other with dignity and respect. This means that he is very sure that he is capable of doing it. It also places Biden in a position of authority.

4.2 The Median-value Modal Verbs

If we do that, I guarantee you, we will not fail. We have never, ever, ever failed in America when we have acted together.

All Americans. And I promise you: I will fight as hard for those who did not support me as for those who did.

In Biden’s inauguration speech, the most used medial modal word was “will”, which appeared 28 times. The word “will” indicates a strong intention, commitment or determination for the time to come. It is used dominating to express information about what will happen in the future. And it also can make representation about what will happen later, which are necessarily based on the speaker’s beliefs, predictions, or intentions. In the examples above, Biden told his audience what he would lead to do in the future, based on his beliefs or intentions: to lead the American people to unite and work together to meet all the challenges, and to follow the example of the power of role models. These examples clearly express Biden’s strong emotion: he has promised Americans that he is capable of making it happen.

4.3 The High-value Modal Verbs

And we must reject the culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured.

That's democracy. That's America. The right to dissent peaceably, within the guardrails of our Republic, is perhaps this nation's greatest strength.

We must set aside politics and finally face this pandemic as one nation.

In political speeches, speakers can enhance their authority and influence the opinions and actions of their listeners by giving irresistible advice or commands with modal verbs such as "must". In these processes, the speaker's will is imposed on the listener in a subjective or objective way. Here, Biden expressed with an irresistible order that he wants the United States to be united, not divided, and that the entire United States must put the fight against the epidemic first.

Biden followed the way politicians use modal auxiliary verbs to enhance their tone. Demonstrating his status as president, he imposed his will on his audience. And because he used many modal verbs to reflect the objectivity of his speech, it did not come across as arrogant. Biden's skillful use of modal verbs brought him closer to his audience while he established his authority.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes President Joe Biden's inaugural speech through the person and modality systems of the interpersonal function of systemic functional grammar, and briefly explains how the interpersonal function is generally realized in political speeches. In his inaugural speech, Biden usually uses the pronouns "we", "you", and "they" to maintain his authority and status, while simultaneously bringing him closer to his listeners. The purpose is to maintain one's authority and status while bringing one's audience closer. By establishing an intimate relationship with the audience, Biden gains the audience's favor and approval in order to achieve his own intentions and impose his will on the audience.

The magnitude of modal verbs not only shows the authority and status of the speaker, but also shows the interaction with the audience. From the overall distribution of the modal value of Biden's inaugural speech, the modal verbs expressing the medium modal value are used the most, followed by the modal verbs expressing the low modal value, and the modal verbs expressing the high modal value are used the least. This is conducive to narrowing the distance with the public and building interpersonal relationships, thereby increasing the public's trust in politics and improving the enthusiasm of the public to respond to the call.

In conclusion, in his inaugural speech, Biden uses the first person subject to draw closer to the audience, the third person subject to highlight his political leadership position, and the reasonable mood to reflect the national will.

This paper still has many limitations. First of all, the corpus of this paper comes from only one speech of one person, and the data is not convincing. More texts of speeches are needed to support the accuracy of the data. Secondly, this paper focuses on the interpersonal function in political speeches, but does not focus on its practical value. It needs to be further explored in future studies.

References

- [1] Thompson, Geoff. *Introducing Functional Grammar*. Routledge. 2013
- [2] Wang Xiaochen, Gao Yang. A comparative study of British and American leaders' inaugural speeches from the perspective of interpersonal function [J]. *Journal of Lvliang University*, 2021,11(04):28-32.
- [3] He Yongmei. An analysis of the interpersonal function of modal verbs in English political speeches [J]. *Journal of Yangtze University (Social Science Edition)*, 2009,32(05):80-82.

[4] Gao Yanjie, Ding Yi, Jiang Yue. *The interpersonal significance of modality in English political interview texts [J]. Contemporary Foreign Language Studies*, 2020, (06): 50-58+100+2.

[5] Yang Min. *Analysis of the Will to Power in the Interpersonal Function of Legislative Discourse [J]. Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching*, 2008, (04): 5-8.

[6] Li Jiao, Cui Xuehai. *Political speech discourse from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics [J]. Literary Education (Part II)*, 2018, (11): 24-26.