

The Realizations of Interpersonal Function in English Editorials

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the realizations of Halliday's theory of the interpersonal function through mood and modality in English news editorials. After the analysis we explore this subgenre of news deeper and helps readers to have a better understanding of the meaning of writers of editorials.

1. Introduction

The framework used for analysis is Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. According to Halliday (1978: 135), text is a semantic unit. At the level of semantics, language has ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning, which are used as the basis for exploring how meanings are created and understood.

Different situations give rise to a variety of languages. According to Halliday (1978), the reason why there are different varieties is that the language user's choice of meanings is determined by certain context of situation. English News, as a common variety in our life, has always been one of the focus of study of linguists. This paper tries to analyze the realizations of the interpersonal function in editorials, a subgenres of English news. The editorials are mainly from *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Times*, and *Economist*.

2. Halliday's Study on Mood and Modality

Systemic Functional Grammar considers discourse as a functional means for communication with which people can express different views and in the meantime the interpersonal relationship is realized. Halliday comes up with three metafunctions of language, one of which is the interpersonal function, people using language to interact with each other. As is known to all, one of the important functions of language is to communicate with each other, and to form certain kind of social connections. When we communicate, we are conveying some meanings, trying to make things done, or expressing opinions, to name just a few. All of these are studied in the interpersonal function, which can be divided into Mood system and Modality system in the grammar. According to Halliday (1994: 363), mood expresses the speech function. The most fundamental purposes in any exchange are, of course, giving (and taking) or demanding (and being given) a commodity of some kind — what Halliday (1994: 68) calls “goods & services”, which are closely associated with particular grammatical structures: declarative clauses; interrogative clauses; and imperative clauses. These are the three main choices in the mood system of the clause (Thompson, 1996:40). Halliday (1994: 356) defines modality as the “area of meaning that lies between yes and no — the intermediate ground between positive and negative polarity.”

3. English News Editorials

Editorials are a very special subgenre of English news. Morley (2004) says that “editorials are the voice of the newspaper”. They usually comment on recent events which are told elsewhere in the newspaper. One of the prime functions of the editorial page is to declare the newspaper’s principles and policies. “It may argue, attack, criticize and try to persuade the reader to accept its principles.” (Mott, 1967: 254) The editorial page provides a place for a column of news behind the news written by special reporters who have unusual facilities for explaining behind-the-scene events. Because of the by-line or signature the columnists are permitted a freedom of style and expression which provides more background information than could an objectively written news story. In comments and appraisals the editorial writers interpret the news of the day in accordance with policies of the newspapers which they serve. Fortified by knowledge and experience not available to readers of the news columns, the writer is able to analyze the events and measure their worth. In the editorial column, the writer speaks boldly or gently at issues and policies demand. S/he may state with calm conviction, urge with force, or suggest with subtlety, but in all cases s/he hopes to influence or inform on news and issues of the times.

4. Mood and Modality in Editorials

4.1. Mood in Editorials

As speech functions decide the choice of the mood, different functions are realized by different moods. The function of editorials differs from that of news reports. As we know, the function of news reports is to provide the latest information to the public and the expression of the reporters’ opinions is barred. While in editorials, things are quite the opposite. The function of the editorials is to give comments on the events that happened around the world or on issues that attract public’s attention. The reporters’ opinions are directly stated on behalf of the newspaper. Due to the difference in function, we can find that in editorials the moods selected are varied, and there are not just declarative moods, but also interrogative moods, and imperative moods. The distribution of different moods in editorials is listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of different moods in editorials.

	Total sentences	Declarative mood		Interrogative mood		Imperative mood	
		number	%	number	%	number	%
editorials	1606	1507	93.84	64	3.99	13	0.81

We can see that the function of editorials is not just to provide opinions but also to describe what happened at the same time. So we can find that the moods used are more varied than that in corpus of news reports. The following are some examples of declarative moods in the corpus of editorials.

1. Those European who are tempted in the light of the dismal scenes in New Orleans this fortnight, to downgrade the American challenges should meditate on one word: universities.

In these declarative sentences, the reporter, on the one hand, described the event that has happened, and on the other hand, also gave his/her opinions. In Example1, the reporter thinks that *European should ... meditate on one word: universities*. Here we should note that in the same example, the reporter uses declarative mood to express the imperative meaning, which is quite common in the corpus of editorials. The imperative mood sounds stiff and the reporter often

replaces it with declarative mood to make it easier to be accepted by the public.

Interrogative mood is more often used in editorials than in news reports. The percentage of the occurrence of interrogative mood is 3.99%.(see Table 1) There is about one interrogative mood in every piece of the editorials that has been selected as materials. The use of the interrogative mood can bring reporters closer to the readers, sounding as if they are having a conversation. The readers will feel more involved into the whole story. Let’s look at the following example.

2. Why have European universities declined so precipitously in recent decades? What can be done to restore them to their former glory? The answer to the first question lies in the role of the state ...The answer to the second question is to set universities free from the state ...

In the above paragraph, using this question-answer form, the reporter seems to converse with the readers and thus shorten the distance between them, and this also can attract readers’ attention and arouse common concern over the issue that is under discussion. Sometimes the reporter just raises a question to attract readers’ attention, and does not always provide an answer that directly follows the question. The answer is open to readers who have an interest in the issue that is under discussion.

From Table 1, we can see that imperative mood does not appear as often as interrogative mood. The occurrence of imperative mood only accounts for 0.81% of the total. Only when reporters want to emphasize strongly their opinions do they use imperative mood. For instance:

3. But *don’t tell* that to shortsighted American textile companies. They are too busy crowing and looking for other ways to limit Chinese imports.

In Example 3, the reporter expresses his/her dissatisfaction with what the American companies have done so far, and tries to make them face the music. In the third sentence, the writer uses the imperative structure *let us* to include himself/herself, which sounds more comfortable to the readers.

4.2. Modality in Editorials

4.2.1. Distribution of Modal Verbs in Editorials

Modal verbs are used in large numbers in editorials. There are altogether 529 modal verbs that can be identified in the 50 pieces of editorials. The distribution of all the modal verbs in the corpus of editorials is listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of modal verbs in editorials.

modal verbs	must	can	could	may	might	will	would	should
occurrence	25	68	59	33	24	92	110	77
rate in the modal verbs	4.73%	12.85%	11.15%	6.24%	4.54%	17.39%	20.79%	14.56%

From Table 2, we can see that the percentage of modal verbs of median value (*will, would, should*) ranks the highest which accounts for 52.74% of the total modal verbs. This percentage is almost the same with that of the news reports. These kinds of verbs can express the writers’ opinion in a moderate way. Look at the following examples.

4. With inflationary pressures rising, the new Fed chairman *will* need to push short-term interest rates higher; there *will be* much less room to cut rates later, as Mr Greenspan did after the stock market bubble burst in 2001. *Would* any sane persons want this job?

Here the two *will* are used to predict future events and express *possibility*. The last *would* is used to express the “will” of a person, which is that no sane persons want to take this job. As we have discussed in the corpus of news reports, another modal verb of median value *should* is often used to express the reporters’ opinions but less strongly than *must*. The occurrence of it in editorials

accounts for 14.56% of the total, compared with the 4.87% of it that appears in the news reports. So we can see that

5. Mr Bush, who has yet to use the presidential veto even when presented with absurdities like a bridge to nowhere in Alaska, *should not* tolerate any more follies.

What come second are modal verbs of low value, such as *can, could, may, might*. *Can* and *may* are used to express permission, (e.g. *You may come.*) and also used to express ability and possibility. When expressing possibility, the difference lies between *can* and *may* is formality, as we have discussed.

6. And Tony Blair *might* begin to wonder this Blunkett can any longer reach the parts of the electorate that nobody else in his government seemed able to penetrate.

7. To the long list of Afghanistan dysfunctional institution *may* soon be added its parliament.

8. The president *could* also show his commitment to serious debate on this issue by dismissing some of the more ridiculous proposals ...

In Example 6, the reporter uses *might* to indicate that the possibility for Tony Blair to *wonder this Blunkett can any longer reach the parts of the electorate that nobody else in his government seemed able to penetrate* is small. In Example 7, from the use of *may* we can see that it is very possible for the parliament to be added into the institution, because *may* denotes greater possibility than *might*. In Example 8, we can see that when using *could*, the reporter has the indication that s/he is less certain. Let us come to the modal verbs of high value, such as *must, ought to, have to, need, etc.* Look at the following examples.

9. Yes, men *ought to* be involved with their children. Yes, the role of family breadwinner *ought to* be flexible. No, mothers ought not to be expected to sacrifice their careers when the moment maybe more opportune for a father to sacrifice his.

In Example 9, the reporter uses two positive forms and one negative form of *ought to* to strongly propose her idea that men be involved with the raising of the children. The repetition of *ought to* reinforces the influence of the words on the readers.

In this section we have discussed the distribution of modal verbs in the fifty pieces of editorials. We can see that the percentage of modal verbs of median value ranks the highest, followed by modal verbs of low value and that of high value, which is almost the same with that of news reports. We find that reporters prefer modal verbs of median value and low value instead of modal verbs of high value. This shows that when expressing opinions and attitudes, reporters do not always make assertions. Instead, they are moderate in choosing the modal verbs and show some kind of rationality. Now, let us move on to the next section — modal adjuncts.

4.2.2. Distribution of Modal Adjuncts in Editorials

We can identify a large number of Mood Adjuncts and Comment Adjuncts in the corpus of editorials. It is a powerful device to express reporters' opinions and attitude. The distribution of these modal adjuncts is listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Distribution of modal adjuncts in editorials.

	Mood adjuncts	Comment adjuncts	Co-occurrence of modal verbs and modal adjuncts	Co-occurrence of two Modal Adjuncts	In total
occurrence	383	63	24	13	483
Rates	79.30%	13.04%	4.97%	2.69%	100%

10. The government *certainly* has a responsibility to help students to borrow against their future incomes.

11. It *probably* is the case that the earlier reforms focused too much on the affluent city-dwellers at the expense of the rural poor ...

In Example 10, the use of *certainly* — a modal adjunct of high value makes the reporter's opinion obvious to the public. In Example 11, the word *probably* belongs to median value word of modality which shows the reporter's uncertainty about the comment. Co-occurrence of both modal verbs and modal adjuncts can also be founded, but not in a large number. The occurrence of it accounts for 4.97% of the total modal adjuncts. (see Table 3) Look at the following examples:

12. Mr McCain's aim was simple enough: to clear up any doubt that *could possibly* exist about America's standards.

13. They *will almost certainly* remain politically paralysed at least until the French presidential election of 2007.

From the above examples, we can see that certainty is decreased instead of increasing with the co-occurrence of modal verbs and modal adjuncts. The tone of *will almost certainly* is much weaker than the tone of *will*.

Co-occurrence of two modal adjuncts, as we have discussed, can weaken the certainty and show the reporter's lack of powerful evidence to support what s/he is saying. But this kind of structure is not often found in editorials. (see Table 3) Look at the following examples:

14. Mr McCain argues that torture is *nearly always* useless, as an interrogation technique ...

15. Interest in literature has *probably never* been higher.

In Example 14, *nearly* and *always* are quite contradictory to each other. Such use of words shows uncertainty of the statement. In Example 15, although the word *never* belongs to modal adjuncts of high value, the use of *probably* before it weakens the strength. Expansion of the Predicator is not very subjective and not very objective either in expressing the reporters' opinions. They well disguise reporters' opinions towards the statements. Look at the following examples:

16. Studies suggest that children in the beneficiary families *are less likely to* be stunted by poor nourishment and *less likely to* drop out of school.

17. Singapore *is determined to* turn itself into a "knowledge island".

In the above two examples, the use of *are less likely to*, *is determined to*, *be willing to* makes the sentences appear more objective and thus more convincing.

In this section we have discussed the distribution of modal adjuncts in the fifty pieces of editorials. Now we will move on the last section of the realization of modality — modality metaphor.

4.2.3. Distribution of Modality Metaphor in Editorials

In this section, we shall talk about the explicit subjective and explicit objective forms of modality in the corpus of editorials. Since explicit subjective orientation can make the writers' opinion stand out, they sometimes resort to this device to express their opinions directly and thus take whole responsibility for the statements. Look at the following examples:

18. If Mr Bush means what he says about the nest chairman being politically independent, then *we believe* the best choice would be Don Kohn, ...

19. *I am astonished* that there hasn't been more of an outcry at Mr Blunkett's treatment, which *seems to me* to be driven by some prevented and prurient obsession with the sex life of a blind man.

In Example 18, although the reporter uses the explicit subjective form of modality, s/he combines it with *if* structure and a modal verb *would* to decrease the responsibility s/he will take. In Example 19, the reporter's attitude is vividly expressed by phrases like *I am astonished* and *seems to me*, and s/he also takes the whole responsibility for the statements.)

Explicit subjective orientation can also be realized by prepositional phrases, such as *in my view*, *in my opinion*, etc. Look at the following example:

20. And in principle Mr Davis remains, *in my view*, the figure who would be most likely to get behind enemy lines and thus revive the Conservative Party.

When going through the materials taken from the websites, we can only identify a few explicit objective forms of modality, which accords with the fact that editorials are used to express subjective opinions. One more thing worthy of note is that there appear more *if* structures in editorials. According to Martin (1992:413), the conjunction *if* can be used to imply the modalization meaning. Journalists use *if* to project a clause so as to avoid the use of *may* directly. Such rewording of using conjunctions constructs the metaphorical modalization. Look at the following examples:

21. And *if* turnout was down on Afghanistan's uplifting presidential vote last year, at around 50%, it nonetheless bespoke strong support for democracy and for accountable governance.

22. *If* well done, these conditional cash-transfer schemes, as they are called, have several advantages over traditional social spending.

The journalists often use *if* to suggest the probability of the proposition, suggesting a kind of alternative for the readers to think about. In this way the readers are involved into the discussion easily.

5. Conclusion

This present paper starts from introducing English news as a discourse. Then Halliday's view on mood and modality is introduced. In studying the 50 pieces of editorials, this present paper focuses on the realizations of the interpersonal function in news editorials, hoping to explore how mood and modality work in this subgenres. From the study, we have reached the following conclusions. The mood used in editorials are various as an auxiliary device to express reporters' opinions and attitudes. The use of quotes can make the text more objective, however, they do not appear often in editorials, which aim at expressing opinions. Modality can be realized through modal verbs, modal adjuncts and others. We can identify a large number of modal verbs and modal adjuncts in editorials, which shows that when expressing opinions, editorials tend to be mild, making their opinions seem to have more rationality. Thus, they will be more acceptable to the public. And editorials tend to use more explicit subjective forms of modality.

To sum up, editorials use a lot more different expressions of modality to express opinions and attitudes. There are just a few explicit subjective and explicit objective forms of modality in editorials, which shows that they are rational when expressing opinions and attitudes.

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