

Analysis of Interpersonal Function in Speech

--A Case Study in Obama's WHCD Address

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Financial Support:

1.Major Theoretical and Practical Research Project of Shaanxi Social Science Federation "On Comparative Education Model of European Universities and Shaanxi higher education based on Construction of First Class Universities and Top Disciplines" (2018C066)

2.Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities of China "On Teacher Education of European Universities in Bologna Process" (NO. 3102017jc19006)

3.NPU Research Fund for Degree and Postgraduate Education "On Comparative Postgraduate Education between European Universities and Chinese Universities based on Construction of First Class Universities and Top Disciplines" (2018AC13)

Abstract

In this paper, the modal, modality and person system in interpersonal function proposed by Halliday are used as the theoretical framework. This paper analyzes Obama's speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2016, and explores how Obama realizes his political aim by speech and shows the realization of language interpersonal function.

White House Correspondents' Dinner, WHCD, is held every year on the last Saturday of April. Since taking office, Obama's annual speech at this dinner has left a very deep impression. Obama's speech in WHCD in 2016 was his eighth and final speech, and he drew applause in his unique style.

The study shows that mood system, modal system and personal system are all used in Obama's 2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner speech. In terms of modal system, declarative sentences is used most frequently, imperative sentences and interrogative sentences are used less. The reason is that Obama is mainly conveying information to hearers. In terms of modality, Obama uses median values most frequently, followed by the low and high value modality. In this way, the audience can accept the speech content easier. From the point of view of the person system, the use of the first person pronouns dominates, followed by the third person and the second person pronoun.

Based on the three aspects of interpersonal function, this paper analyzes Obama's skills of conveying information in his speech, explores the reasons of his excellent speech, and provides some references for better understanding of the characteristics of political speeches.

KEY WORDS: interpersonal function, English political speeches, Obama's 2016 WHCD speech

Introduction

With the development of globalization, the interpersonal relationship is becoming an important part to our business and daily life. As we all know, improving interpersonal relationship means communicating with others well. The ways of communicating are various. Among these methods, speech is an effective and political way to communicate with others. Speech is a directive and effective way to express emotions, give information and establish social and personal relationships. In general, speech can be established into three kinds. They are political speech, judicial speech and academic speech. In addition, among these three kinds of speech, political speech is an important text to analyze because political speech not only reflects the speakers' speaking skills but also demonstrates the attitude and policy of the politician.

In recent years, linguists pay more attention to the study of interpersonal function meaning. Among these functionalists, American Halliday who proposed the systemic functional grammar is the most remarkable one. Halliday came up with the three metafunctions in systemic functional grammar. The three metafunctions are ideational function, textual function and interpersonal function. Language is used by the speakers to express information to the hearers. This function refers to the ideational function. The interpersonal function is that language is used to establish and develop social relations. By the interpersonal function, the speaker is communicating with hearers and the interaction can be realized. The textual function is to organize information and make sure that text of English is not a random list of word meanings. Halliday's interpersonal function can be used as an effective theoretical framework to analyze the features of political speeches.

Literature Review

Many linguists pay attention to the study of the interpersonal function and they already made some contributions to this field. And this part will present previous studies abroad and previous studies at home.

The Prague School proposes that studying the function of language is the first step to study language. They view as functional; that is, language is a device for realizing a range of fundamental functions and carrying out tasks for the community.

Influenced by the Prague School, Halliday views language as a system of functions, and he proposes to study the language in terms of function. All the more, Halliday puts forward that the entity of the language is decided by the function of the language. He explains the language phenomenon in perspective of function.

The great linguist, Martin, also makes a lot of contribution to the interpersonal function. Martin claims that the interpersonal model of interpersonal function has three aspects. They are negotiation, appraisal and involvement.

By analyzing the tenor of two letters, Tony Bex claims that the interpersonal potentials of language include the forms of greeting, the lexical choice such as “sure”, “suspect” inferring the degrees of epistemic certainty and features of typographical layout. (Bex, 1996, p. 109)

The study of linguistics attracts many domestic linguistics and interpersonal function is also becoming popular in China.

Huang Guowen mainly focuses his study of the interpersonal function on the analysis of commercial advertising discourse. And he (2001) also claims that declarative dominating the entire text show that the role of the writer is the information provider. Huang Guowen also claims that although the functional grammar is widely used in discourse analysis, the application is still not enough.

Liu Ying (2004) focuses on the study of interpersonal meaning of bank brochures from mood, modality and person systems. She reaches the conclusion that social roles of writers and readers are changed under various backgrounds. Thus, the interpersonal meaning of English bank brochures is achieved.

Deng Chang (2014) studies the interpersonal meaning in TED speeches. It finds out that mood, modality and personal pronoun are employed to realize interpersonal meaning to convey speakers' views, impress the listeners, and establish and maintain relationship with them.

Public speech is different from casual conversation.

Studies on public speeches in west countries began earlier compared to those in China.

Edelman (1984) maintains political speakers use linguistic devices to evoke hearers to form political beliefs. For those who know little about politics, political speeches can serve as a tool to make them understand political events by explaining in detail.

Grice (1995) points out that an effective political public speech must draw hearers' attention, make them think in through way by correcting their opinions and persuade them to do anything the speaker wants them to.

Osborn argues that “every discourse ought to be a living creature; having a body of its own and head and feet; there should be a middle, beginning and end, adapted to one another and to the whole (1998:144)”.

In China, many scholars discuss the stylistic features of English public speaking, such as Wang Zuoliang, Xu Zhenzhong, Xu Youzhi and so on.

Wang Zuoliang (1985) holds that public speeches are more formal than everyday conversations. The structure of language is complex but easy to understand. The speech sounds lively by using a lot of metaphors and formal by employing many abstract words.

Xu Zhenzhong (1990) maintains that in speeches, especially political speeches, rhetorics are used to achieve the purpose of propaganda, agitation and education.

Xu Youzhi (2005) analyses general features and stylistic features of public speeches.

Theoretical Framework

3.1 Halliday’s Model of Interpersonal Function

Halliday proposes three metafunctions of language including the ideational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the textual metafunction by observing children’s acquisition of language.

3.2 Halliday’s Model of Interpersonal System

3.2.1 Mood System

The major system network within the interpersonal functional component is the mood system network.

It shows the relations between speakers and listeners in an interaction. According to Halliday (2014), the mood element is the component that realizes the mood type of the clause that is closely related with the semantic choice of speech functions.

3.2.2 Speech Role and Function

Table 1 Giving or demanding. goods-&-services or information (Halliday. 2014:136)

	Commodity exchanged	
role in exchange	(a) goods-&-service	(b)information
Giving	“offer” Do you like that cup?	“statement” She is giving him the cup.
Demanding	“command” Pass me that cup!	“question” What is she giving him?

3.3 Modality System

Modality is one of the most important interpersonal systems (Halliday, 2014). It shows the speaker's judgement, or request of the judgement of the listener, on the status of what is being said. It refers to the range of ways in which speakers can temper their meanings. Modality is realized through the mood element, either through the finite element or through the mood element, either through the finite element or through a separate mood adjunct (Halliday, 2014). Modality is realized by modality type, orientation and value.

Table 2 “values” of modality (Halliday, 2014: 694)

	Probability	Usually	Obligation	Inclination
Low	possible	sometimes	allowed	willing
Median	probable	usually	supposed	keen
High	certain	always	required	determined

Table 3 “values” of modal operators (Halliday, 2014: 145)

	Low	Median	High
Positive	can, may, could, might, (dare)	will, would, should, is/ was to	must, ought to, need, has/ had to
Negative	needn't, doesn't/ didn't + need to, have to	won't, wouldn't, shouldn't, (isn't/ wasn't to)	mustn't, oughtn't to, can't, couldn't, (mayn't, mightn't, hasn't/hadn't to)

Halliday (2014) classified the value of modality into three categories: the high value, the median value and low value.

Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

This thesis intends to explain the interpersonal function behind Obama's political speech. The study mainly answers the following research questions:

- 1) Whether mood, modality and person systems are realized in Obama's speeches at the WHCD?
- 2) What properties of mood, modality are distributed in Obama's speeches at the WHCD?
- 3) What role does the interpersonal function play in Obama's speech?

3.2 Data Collection

The thesis chooses Obama's 2016 WHCD Address as the research data. This paper analyzes Obama's speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2016.

The thesis chooses Obama's speech as the research data because of the following reasons. The reason is that Barack Obama is the only black president in

American history. This is Obama's final speech delivered by him in White House. In the speech, Obama used humorous tone showing his political views. So his speech must be well organized and high qualified.

3.3 Data Presentation

In this thesis, qualitative and quantitative methods are both used in the study of the interpersonal function of Obama's presidential election speeches. The study of quantitative is adopted to form the theoretical framework. Qualitative study method is used to define the phenomenon described initially and then the important factors and elements will be selected. The function of quantitative analysis is to measure the frequency of the devices adopted by Obama and explore what an important role the interpersonal function plays in Obama's WHCH speech.

The Realization of Interpersonal Function and its Meaning in Obama's WHCD Speech

4.1 The Means of Realizing the Interpersonal Function in Obama's Speech

In general, most linguists and scholars choose mood, modality, personal pronouns and evaluation as the major means to realize the interpersonal function of political speech. But in this chapter, the author will choose three of the means. They are mood, modality and personal pronouns. The reason of choosing these means is that statistics on mood, modality and personal pronoun are relatively objective.

4.2 The Realization of Interpersonal Meaning by Mood, Modality Systems

4.2.1 The Realization of Interpersonal Meaning by Mood System

Mood system is an important device in realizing the interpersonal meaning of language. Different mood types can be derived with different forms of Subject and Finite. They are the declarative mood, the interrogative mood and the imperative mood. Obama adopts the three types of mood in the speeches.

Table 4 sentence type distribution in Obama's 2016 WHCD speech

type	declarative sentence	imperative sentence	interrogative sentence	total
number	203	28	10	241
percentage	84%	12%	4%	

4.2.1.1 The Realization of Interpersonal Meaning by the Declarative Mood

The president's speech lasted 33 minutes, with a total of 241 sentences. From table 4, 84% is the statement, followed by the imperative and interrogative sentences, respectively accounted for 12% and 4%. This is mainly because the purpose of the speech is mostly to inspire and incite. In his speech, Obama recalled what happened during his last year in office, for example, the challenge of his

authority from Congress, the ignorance of his impending departure. Obama's introduction of the value and significance of the press was also a persuasion, urging attention to the existence of the press. In the final stage of the speech, Obama expressed his gratitude.

Example 1:

Next year at this time, someone else will be standing here in this very spot, and it's anyone's guess who she will be. But standing here ... Eight years ago, I said it was time to change the tone of our politics.

Obama said a new president will give a speech in the White House next year and used "she" to imply that Hillary is the next president. At the same time, it is mentioned that eight years ago, he wanted to try to improve the political environment, but the fact is that the political environment has become worse.

Example 2:

In just six short months, I will be officially a lame duck, which means Congress now will flat-out reject my authority. And Republican leaders won't take my phone calls. He said he was going to step down, and that he was getting ignored. For example, congress leaders were no longer answering his calls. In fact, these phenomena have already existed during Obama's tenure.

Example 3:

Key staff are now starting to leave the White House. Even reporters have left me. Savannah Guthrie, she's left the White House Press Corps to host the Today show.

When Obama ended his tenure, some White House staffs would leave. Specifically, some reporters would practice job-hopping. By the way, Obama ridiculed that CNN does not count as news.

Example 4:

But we've always shared the same goal-- to root our public discourse in the truth, to open the doors of this democracy.

These words are expressing Obama's gratitude. Obama said everyone will fight for democracy and will work together to make America become just and fair. He also advocates that American should work together for the common goal.

4.2.1.2 The Realization of Interpersonal Meaning by the Imperative Mood

A small amount of imperative sentences in the speech is mainly used to stimulate the atmosphere and arouse the interest of the audience. In the whole speech, the type of "let's" is used most frequently.

Example 5:

Bernie's slogan has helped his campaign catch fire among young people. "Feel the Bern." It's a good slogan. Hillary's slogan has not had the same effect. Let's see this.

In the introduction of campaign slogans of presidential candidates Bernie and Hillary, Obama used "let's" to draw audience's attention. The use of imperative sentences has been used repeatedly in the interpretation of slogans in order to give the audience a strong sense of intimacy and belonging. This is an important speech skill that Obama uses.

Example 6:

Well, let me conclude tonight on a more serious note. I want to thank the Washington press corpus, I want to thank Carol for all that you do.

Imperative sentences can also be used to elicit new topics. Obama is here to tell the audience that he will then express his gratitude. Using imperative sentences can be treated as a hint to attract the audience's attention.

4.2.1.3 The Realization of Interpersonal Meaning by the Interrogative Mood

The main purpose of the interrogative sentences in Obama's speech is to arouse the people's thinking, to lead the people to follow him. It is an important means for the speaker to take a dominant position.

Example 7:

Hillary trying to appeal to young voters is a little bit like your relative just signed up for Facebook. "Dear America, did you get my poke?" "Is it appearing on your wall?"

The speech said that Bernie is very good at pleasing young people. Hillary is also trying to will the support of young people, but the effect is not good. Here are two interrogative sentences to show that Hillary's embarrassment

Example 8:

And then there's Ted Cruz. He ...the hoop a "basketball ring." What else is in his lexicon? Baseball sticks? Football hats? But sure, I'm the foreign one.

Ted called "hoop" as the "basketball ring". Obama implied he was a foreigner. Many people questioned whether he was really qualified to run for president because Ted was born in Canada.

From the above analysis, it confirms that mood system is an important way in realizing interpersonal meaning. The declarative mood is not only used to give information, but also employed to make questions, give offers and make commands. Besides the declarative mood, the interrogative and imperative moods are employed in Obama's speeches, which greatly contribute to the realization of interpersonal meaning. The imperative mood obviously signals the unequal relations between the speaker and his listeners. Through the imperative mood, Obama maintains his authoritative role, wields power upon the listeners implicitly and inspires the listeners to take actions. The interrogative mood attracts listeners' attention and allows them to fill in the missing information, consequently making the interaction between the speaker and the listeners realized. In all moods, Obama embeds beliefs and policies.

4.2.2 The Realization of Interpersonal Meaning by Modality System

The meaning of modal system is also one of the important parts of interpersonal meaning, which is the judgment of the speaker on the success and validity of the proposition he speaks.

Table 5: the distribution of modal words in speech

value	low value				medium value			high value
modal words	can	could	might	may	will	would	should	have to
number	13	2	2	1	7	2	3	1
percentage	58.7%				37.9%			3.4%

From table 5, Obama frequently uses low and medium-value modal words in his speeches. The low value modal words “can” are used most frequently. By using a large number of medium and low value modal words, Obama makes listeners accept his political demands without a sense of tension. The frequent use of “can” here encouraged the journalists to report from an objective perspective, and stressed that the objectivity of the news is necessary. The use of high value modal words would give people a strong sense of oppression, with a low value modal words tending to make listeners more receptive.

Conclusion

The interpersonal function is to use language to express opinion, interact with others and establish the relationship with others. There are different ways to express the speaker’s feelings, attitudes and judgements. In this thesis, the author uses Obama’s WHCD speech as an example to find out by what means the interpersonal function in Obama’s speech. According to the study, we can realize the interpersonal function through the perspective of mood, modality operators and personal pronouns. First, the political speech is analyzed by mood. Comparing with other mood types, the speaker applies declaratives more frequently. That is because the purpose of political speech is to give information to the audience. So the speaker mainly employs declarative to convey his policies and plans to the audience in order to realize the interpersonal function of giving information. Sometimes, Obama uses imperative mood to inspire the audience and ask for their support. By using imperatives, Obama can attract the attention of the hearers and increase his authority.

The modal operators are effective devices to realize the interaction between the speaker and hearer. Obama chooses the word “can”, “will” and “must” to reveal different interpersonal meanings. The word “can” indicates not only the meaning of possibility but also the meaning of permission. The meaning of permission makes the speaker in the power position. By using “can”, Obama shows that the hearers are allowed to decide their own future and even the country’s future. And the “will” also refers to the meaning of promising. Generally speaking, the speaker tries to put himself in authority position by using the mood operator “will”. The function of “must” is to give a command or advice in

political speech. The speaker can apply the ambiguity of “must” to increase his status and establish an intimate relationship with the hearers at the same time. These modal operators are employed to realize the interpersonal meaning by attracting the listeners’ attention, encouraging their compassion and winning their support.

According to the study, the analysis of Obama’s presidential speech by the interpersonal function is very practical and effective. By using different devices skillfully, the speaker can shorten the distance between the listeners and him and establish a friendly relationship with them.

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