A Discourse Analysis of Mrs. Bracknell'Dramatic Speech Under Interpersonal Function

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Abstract

Based on the theory of interpersonal function in systematic functional linguistics, this study will explore the literary significance of the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* from the perspectives of mood, modality and appraisal system. Mrs. Bracknell's dialogue will be chosen as the corpus, and qualitative and quantitative research methods will be used to analyze the speech characteristics of the protagonists in the dialogue. This paper will explore the role and influence of dialogic language on the construction of character characteristics and interpersonal relationships, and will, hopefully, help to prove the feasibility of using systemic functional linguistics to interpret literary works.

Key words: *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Interpersonal meaning; Mood system; Modality system; Appraisal system

1. INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of functional grammar, Halliday (1985) divides language functions into three categories: ideational function, textual function and interpersonal function. The three metafunctions of systematic functional linguistics constitute the primary research object of text analysis (Wang, 2018). Interpersonal meaning, as a concept in the metafunction of language, reflects the interpersonal relationship between people. It can reflect the relationship between the participants and also the speaker can build his own social relationship through interpersonal meaning and assume different roles. Since the 20th century, SFL has been one of the most important linguistic theories. For many years, systematic functional grammar has been used to analyze literature, advertisements, news and other texts. In recent years, in the study of both linguistics and literature, people pay more and more attention to the interpersonal relationship and change of language. This trend differs sharply from previous studies which emphasize the equivalence between form and meaning (Mc Cathy & Carter, 1994). This trend does not appear all of a sudden but is a natural result of the increasing awareness of interpersonal meaning in the language application (Li, 2004). Therefore, through the interpersonal analysis of dialogue, this paper endeavors to understand how language reflects people's attitude, status and relationship.

The Importance of Being Earnest is one of Oscar Wilde's masterpieces and is widely regarded as his most successful comedy. The play obtains a big success for its witty dialogues and a wonderful plot. It consists of three acts and utilizes the narrative pattern. Gently but persistently, *The Importance of Being Earnest* touches upon large issues of class, gender, sexuality, identity and other topics that engage the interest of contemporary readers. Like in all the other great works of art, despite the specificity of its context, the rich and often sardonic portrait of human nature allows Earnest to transcend its setting, time period, and local features to create broad resonance with its readers'and viewers'experiences. Although many studies have been made from the perspective of theme, Wilde's aestheticism, features of comedies, and Wilde's view on marriage, etc., few of the studies focus on the language features in the play and the relationships among main characters.

This paper will take SFL as the theoretical framework and interpersonal meaning as the research starting point to explore the feasibility of applying SFL to the analysis of literary works, especially to the interpretation of dramatic works, in order to expand the application of linguistic theories to literary texts interpretation. The analysis of the interpersonal meaning of the dialogues among the characters in the drama is helpful to reveal Mrs. Bracknell's character and, therefore, helpful for the readers to deepen their understanding of the characters and the theme of the drama.

This research is also of practical significance. The study of the play can help readers have a panorama view of the English upper class life at the end of the 19th century and will also provide a new perspective for literary texts, especially drama texts research. What's more, it will be conducive to the study and teaching of linguistics. All in all, exploring the ways in which drama language realizes interpersonal meaning can help readers better understand the discourse meaning in literary works.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 1960s, the publication of two papers *The Linguistic Study of Literary Text* (Halliday, 1964a) and *Descriptive Linguistics in Literary Studies* (Halliday, 1964b) promoted the linguistic study of the literary text. Later Fowler (1981) puts forward the theory of literature text in social-historical context. Sinclair (1965) observes the interrelation between literature and linguistics. Durey (1988) analyzes the clauses in the novel *Middlemarch* by George Eliot and she finds that interpersonal meaning can be realized by verbal phrases, adverbial phrases, nominal phrases and prepositional phrases.

The literary works, as an important type of text, have also been studied from interpersonal meaning by many Chinese researchers. Zhang Lin (2014) probes into the interpersonal meaning in the selected dialogues between Catherine and Heathcliff within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar, aiming to reveal their characters and relationship through the modality system. Zhang Junping (2015) analyzes the children literature- *Peter Pan* by James Matthew Barrie, a famous English novelist and dramatist. This research analyzes the linguistic features in *Peter Pan* and finds that there exists more complex relationship among the actual reader-the children, the implied reader-the adults and the narrator.

Besides novels, the study of short stories, poems, film and television works and other types of literary works from the perspective of interpersonal meaning is also on the rise. Han Shuying (2011) investigates the interpersonal meaning in *Dubliners*, which is a collection of short stories written by James Joyce. She probes into the interrelationship among the readers, the author and the characters in the story and into the characters'personalities as well. Yang Xueyan & Shi Xiaojing (2015) explore the

characters'personalities from mood and modality system.

Literature review indicates that analyzing the differences in the interpersonal resources of the characters'language can render the interpretation of characters'personalities more objective and comprehensive. It can also be noted that the application of interpersonal meaning to literary works, especially, to novels has gained great achievements. However, researches of drama texts from the perspective of the interpersonal meaning are relatively few. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as an important drama text, is, therefore, worth further research from this perspective.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Interpersonal Meaning

Interpersonal meaning is a kind of concept in language metafunction, which suggests the interpersonal relationship among people. According to SFG, interpersonal meaning reflects the relationship among participants. In written English, the structure of parenthesis complex clause is often used (Miao & Lei, 2019). Speakers can build their social relationship and take on different roles through the interpersonal meaning. According to Halliday, mood and modality are considered as the primary means to realize interpersonal meaning. Halliday also adds more means of realizing interpersonal meaning such as personal system, key and the modifiers expressing the attitude. Later on, Martin (1997) puts forward the theory of appraisal system based on the interpersonal meaning and points out that not only the grammatical means but also the lexical resources can express interpersonal meaning.

3.1.1 Mood

Mood is a syntax used to express interpersonal meaning. In the mood system, interpersonal meaning is realized by modal adjuncts, which are used to express the judgment or position of the author or speaker. There are two roles: information seeker and information giver. At the same time, there are four types of speech roles: providing information, requesting information, providing goods and services, requesting goods and services. Accordingly, these four speech roles have four speech functions: statement, proposal, command and question. Because interpersonal meaning is realized by the interaction between the speaker and the hearer, the speech function can be realized by different mood types. The speaker can use declarative clauses to provide information. The speaker can ask for information by using interrogative mood and goods and services by choosing imperative mood.

The mood in a clause consists of two elements: (1) the subject; (2) the finite. The subject and the finite are closely linked together, and their combination is the meaning of the mood. The subject is "a nominal group, and the finite operator is part of a verbal group" (Halliday, 1985).

According to Halliday, there are three types of mood in clauses: the indicative, the exclamative and the imperative. The indicative can be subdivided into the declarative mood and the interrogative mood. The indicative mood is usually expressed by the declarative sentence, and the interrogative mood is realized by the interrogative sentence. Within the category of interrogative, the yes-no interrogative is for the question of polarity, and the wh-interrogative is for the question of the content. In addition to the two typical mood types, the exclamative mood is expressed by the exclamatory sentence and the imperative mood is expressed by the imperative sentence.

3.1.2 Modality

Modality, another kind of attitudinal resource within the framework of SFL, is defined as the intermediate degree between positive and negative polarity by Halliday. He also states that there are intermediate degrees: various kinds of indeterminacy that fall in between, like "sometimes" or "maybe". These intermediate degrees, between the positive and negative poles, are known collectively as modality. Modality can be regarded as a cognitive, emotional and desiderative attitude towards a state by the speaker/writer. Modality is regarded as a quite important approach to achieve interpersonal function in the Systemic Functional Grammar. Modality can also be divided into two basic types, the first is called modalisation, whereas the second is referred to as modulation. Modalisation is the judgment of the possibility of the proposition. It is usually used for the exchange of information and can be further divided into probability and usuality, such as "perhaps", "probably", "possibly", "usually", etc. While modulation is the judgment of the prospect of the proposition, it is usually used for the exchange of goods and services. Also it can be further divided into obligation and inclination, such as "willing", "allowed", "supposed", "keen", etc. Furthermore, Halliday grades the types of modality: low, medium and high. These different levels are influential in deciding the speaker/writer's commitment to what he/she says or writes.

3.1.3 Appraisal System

As a framework developed from interpersonal meaning under SFL, Appraisal Theory aims to coordinate linguistic resources of social relationship with methods to express attitude. Appraisal Theory contains three subsystems: Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. Attitude is about the emotional, aesthetic and ethical feature of appraisal; Engagement concerns the linguistic resources by which speakers/writers adopt a stance towards the value positions being referenced by the text and with respect to those they address; Graduation is concerned with the scaling or grading of evaluative resources. Each subsystem is further divided into several types. The outline is illustrated in Figure 1.
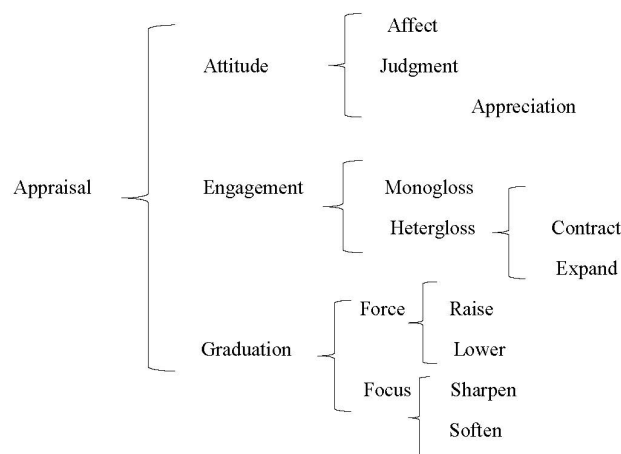

Figure 1
An Overview of Appraisal Resources

4. METHODOLOGY

Theis paper will analyze the dialogues between the protagonists in *The Importance of Being Earnest* from the perspective of interpersonal meaning. The corpus of dialogues comes from the first act of the play between pages 17-20. Both quantitative and qualitative methods will be used to conduct the analysis.

5. THE ANALYSIS OF THE SPEECH OF MRS. BRACKNELL UNDER INTERPERSONAL FUNCTION

5.1 Mood System

The first dialogue to be analyzed is the one that takes place between the protagonists Mrs. Bracknell and Jack. When Jack proposes to Gwendolen, and her mother, Mrs. Bracknell, asks Jack some questions to ensure that her daughter can marry into a rich, powerful and influential family. This chapter focuses on how the interpersonal meaning is realized by mood system, including incomplete clauses, declarative sentences, imperative sentences, interrogative sentences and exclamatory sentences, as well as the most common subject selection. The purpose of the analysis is to reveal the character, emotion and attitude of the protagonists and how the relationship between the two protagonists changes and how the plot moves forward.

Table 1
The number of the clauses by Mrs. Bracknell and Jack

Protagonists	Declarative	Interrogative	Exclamative	Imperative	totality
Mrs. Bracknell	37	19	4	1	61
Jack	35	2	0	0	37

The researcher makes a statistics of the number of the clauses communicated by the two protagonists in Table 1.

5.1.1 Declarative Clauses

According to Halliday, declarative is one of the realization of mood. When the order of subject is before finite, it realized "declarative". Declarative clauses are typically used to initiate conversational exchanges by putting forward information by negotiation and therefore they can construct the speaker as taking on active role in the conversation.

From an interactional perspective, declarative clauses can be seen as doing something like the following: the speaker introduces an entity about which she/he wants to make certain claims; s/he them indicates that kind and degree of validity of the claims she/he is going to make in the Finite; and s/he then make the claims in the rest of the clause. The number of Mrs. Bracknell's declaratives is much more than Jack's as showed in Table 5.1. It suggests that Mrs. Bracknell gets to initiate exchanges by giving more information than Jack and takes on more active and initiative role in their dialogue, since declarative is typically used to initiate conversation exchanges by putting forward information for negotiation and thus they construct the speaker as taking on active, initiative role in the talk. Mrs. Bracknell uses declaratives to try to control the topic. Her declaratives are to open the utterance turn-taking and get more information from the background of Jack, and make Jack know her attitude toward this engagement. In order to achieve this purpose, she uses a lot of declaratives to show her attitude. When she gets the answer from Jack, she almost makes the claims to every question. For instance, when Jack admits that he smokes, Mrs. Bracknell uses two declaratives to put forward this information that "I am glad to hear it". A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. Obviously, she as a speaker takes on an active and initiative role in the talk.

5.1.2 Interrogative Clauses

Interrogatives are typically used to initiate an exchange by requesting information from others. In a yes /no question, which is a question about polarity, it means "I want you to tell me whether or not". In a WH-question, which is a search for a missing piece of information, it means "I want you to tell me the person, thing, time, manner, etc." A quantitative research is made here. In this selected dialogue of Mrs. Bracknell and Jack from Act 1, Mrs. Bracknell asks 19 questions while Jack only 2 clauses. And Mrs. Bracknell uses 12 WH-questions and 7 yes-no questions while Jack is comparatively small in number. Jack just asks 1 WH-question and 1 yes/no question. See Table 2:

Table 2
The number of WH questions and yes/no questions used by Mrs. Bracknell and Jack

Protagonists	WH-questions	Yes-no questions	Totality
Mrs. Bracknell	12	7	19
Jack	1	1	2

From the number of the interrogatives, it can be deduced that firstly Mrs. Bracknell's social position is higher than Jack; secondly as a parent in the Victoria era, Mrs. Bracknell has the powerful right to decide children's marriage. What's more, Jack's deferential answers in declarative confirm the unequal relation between them.

5.1.3 Imperative Clauses

Imperatives typically do not contain element of subject or finite, but only a predicator, and either complement and adjunct. Imperatives are usually used to make commands: to demand someone to do something, which embodies an unequal relationship between speaker and listener. But in actual context, imperatives can function to negotiate action directly. Imperative clauses can be used to order others to offer goods and services as well as be used to make demands, suggestion and persuasion etc.

As is indicated in Table 5.1, there is one imperative clause of Mrs. Bracknell while none of Jack. The analysis above demonstrates that Mrs. Bracknell dominates the conversation and as a dictatorial parent she gets the upper hand. So in the dialogue she uses the imperative clause to show her power in Jack. On the contrary, Jack is in the passive position, so there is no imperative clause by him. When Mrs. Bracknell know the fact that Jack has lost his parents, she says that "I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.". The imperative uttered by her strongly verifies the selfishness, arrogance, ignorance in her personality.

5.2 Modality System

From Tables 5.1 & 5.2, it can be seen that interpersonal meaning is realized by the mood system through analyzing the distributive features of mood resources. It has revealed part of the three major characters'personalities and makes an explanation of their relations to some degree. In order to understand the two main characters'characteristics and their relationship more thoroughly, it is necessary to take the modality analysis into consideration.

5.2.1 Modal Operators

Before the analysis of interpersonal of the modal operators referred in the abstracted dialogue, it is necessary to use the quantitative method to make a statistics of the distribution and frequency of each kind of modal operators used by Mrs. Bracknell and Cecily. See Table 3:

Table 3
The distribution and frequency of modal operators by Mrs. Bracknell and Cecily

Modal operators	Mrs. Bracknell Number	Frequency	Cecily Number	Frequency
should	2	50%	1	33.3%
must	1	25%	1	33.3%
can	1	25%	1	33.3%
Total	4	100%	3	100%

Mrs. Bracknell uses should two times in her speech. Should is used to suggest somebody when people give subjective opinions. In addition, it is used to express the speaker's prediction or reference. Should refers to the senses related with obligation and duty. Should here means obligation and duty. In Mrs. Bracknell's eyes, when one is in the train, the diary can be a good thing to idle time away. She uses should to exemplify her opinion, by which we can infer that she is an empty as well as self-righteous woman who lives in her own imaginary world. Toward this kind of people, obviously the playwright makes the audience or the listeners laugh and provoke them to query the moral ethnic of the Victorian society.

Must is used to show her strong negative attitude toward the event that Cecily engaged with Mr. Earnest. She doesn't believe this is a fact and she just want to deny the fact. This contradictory moves the plot forward.

Can is used to indicate ability, possibility, or permission. In the selected dialogue, Mrs. Bracknell uses the only one sentence. Mrs. Bracknell uses the negative polarity and can here means ability. They imply that she looks down upon the country life and she just wants to show her superiority with Cecily who lives in the country.

From Table 3, it can be found that Mrs. Bracknell uses more modal operators than that of Cecily. These modal operators used by the playwright amply describe the change of Mrs. Bracknell's mental process. When they meet at first, she tries her best to pretend to be Mrs. of gentle disposition. As the plot moves, she has conflicts with Cecily and she uses the modal operators to affirm, deny the fact and persuade even threaten Cecily. From the above analysis, it can be seen that she is a person with double personality. On the one hand, she is selfish and does not want her nephew to marry Cecily. On the other hand, she tries her best to maintain the etiquette of being a woman in the upper class of the city, so as to appear a bit higher than Cecily living in the countryside.

5.3 Appraisal System

As an important part in the play, the dialogue between Jack and Mrs. Bracknell in the first act is conducive for readers'understanding of Mrs. Bracknell's characteristics and the exploration of the relationship between Jack and Mrs. Bracknell. This part compares the attitudinal resources between Jack and Mrs. Bracknell's utterance and based on analysis of specific examples. Table 4 shows the distribution of attitudinal resources in Jack and Mrs. Bracknell's discourse.

Table 4
Distribution of attitudinal resources in Jack and Mrs. Bracknell's discourse

Feature	Frequency in Jack's discourse	Percentage	Frequency in Mrs. Bracknell's discourse	Percentage
Affect	4	33.3%	9	23.1%
Judgment	6	50%	23	59%
Appreciation	2	16.7%	7	17.9%
Total	12	100%	39	100%

5.3.1 Affect
Example 1: (Mrs. Bracknell) I am glad [Affect: satisfaction] to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?

Example 2: (Mrs. Bracknell) I am pleased [Affect: satisfaction] to hear it. I do not approve of [Affect: satisfaction] anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit: touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound.

The evaluative terms in the first two examples belong to the classification of satisfaction in Affect. They indicate Mrs. Bracknell's attitude to Jack's answer when she investigates his eligibility. As a representative of declining aristocrats, Mrs. Bracknell tries to remain a superior posture before Jack. She pretends to be a thoughtful woman, which contrarily reveals her ignorance and superficiality. She thinks that man should have some leisure activities, even smoking counts. Through Jack's answer, she makes sure that she and Jack belong to the same class in an implicit way and thus aligning her with Jack. It reveals that Mrs. Bracknell is very snobbish since she pays much attention to men's social class. She condemns modem education which threatens their status and interests. It shows that the declining aristocrats are fearful of social progress and people's enlightenment because these will shake their dominant position. Oscar Wilde conveys satire to upper class like Mrs. Bracknell for their hypocrisy and ignorance.

5.3.2 Judgment
Example 3: (Mrs. Bracknell) To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing may be regarded as a misfortune [Judgment: normality]; to lose both looks like carelessness [Judgment: capacity]. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical [Judgment: capacity] papers call the purple of commerce, or-did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?

"Misfortune''and "carelessness" are Mrs. Bracknell's judgment on the fact that Jack lost his parents. People discriminate against those who have lost both their parents in the Victorian times. It can be seen that she is very conservative for she would not let her daughter marry this kind of man. But she does not give a negative answer immediately. Instead, she asks about the background of Jack's parents. For the candidates'family social status is also an important requirement for her. This utterance provides evidence to verify Mrs. Bracknell's snobbish characteristics.

5.3.3 Appreciation

Example 4: (Mrs. Bracknell) The unfashionable [Appreciation: social valuation] side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.

Example 4 is Mrs. Bracknell's reaction to Jack's town house. Here, "unfashionable" is used as pun. On the one hand, the word means that the location is not satisfactory；on the other hand, it refers to the shape of the house is out of date. It indicates that Mrs. Bracknell is cavil and pea cockish. A town house could not satisfy her. Even the location and shape of the house are important for her. The playwright attacks the material nature of people at his time. As a representative of the Victorian era, Mrs. Bracknell may also arouse antipathy of the readers. Thus, the playwright aligns himself with the readers to realize his satire in the play.

Example 5: (Mrs. Bracknell) I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible [Appreciation: social valuation] young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really Affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

Example 5 is the prologue of Mrs. Bracknell when she begins to investigate Jack's qualification to marry her daughter. "Eligible" is Mrs. Bracknell's appreciation of those candidates who satisfy her. It can be seen that she is very arrogant to Jack. This also reveals how empty the upper class is. These women have nothing to do but to look for qualified husband for their daughters. Of course, the so-called eligibility means status and possession. Oscar Wilde mocks the prevailing utilitarian ethos and empty upper class in the Victorian time in a humorous way.

CONCLUSION

This study makes an exploration of the interpersonal meaning in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* based on the chosen dialogues among the main characters, especially Mrs. Bracknell, to analyze the interpersonal relationship between characters and the analysis also reveals her personality. The analysis is conducted with both quantitative and qualitative methods. The findings of the study are as follows:

In discourse research, there are many ways to realize interpersonal meaning. (Fan, 2019) Through the analysis of the selected dialogues, it can be seen that the distributive features of mood and modality resources vary across different stages of the plot. Besides, through the analysis of the changes in the choice of mood and modal operators in the character Mrs. Bracknell's language, her relation with others and her personalities can be reflected. And by the analysis of the resources in different stages of the plot, the attitude and relations among the major characters will be displayed clearly. Therefore, the theme of the play can be fully understood through the analysis of the dialogues by mood, modality and appraisal system.

This study carries out an exploration of the interpersonal meaning of the play from the functional view of language, which offers an alternative option to literary analysis. However, not all the dialogues among the three major characters are chosen as the data for analysis due to the limitation of time and space. Therefore, future studies need to choose more dialogues so as to make the study more reliable.

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