

A Contrastive Study of Political Speeches in Presidential Election of Interpersonal Meaning

JIN Pengsun^{[a],*}; LU Fengfeng^[a]

^[a]Department of English, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

* Corresponding author.

Received 1 March 2013; accepted 29 May 2013

Abstract

This thesis attempts to use the interpersonal function in SFL as a tool to analyze the interpersonal meaning in the election speeches given by Obama and McCain. From the aspect of mood, modality, and personal pronoun, it tries to explore the interpersonal meaning contained in the election speeches of Obama and McCain, and tries to explain why Obama performs better than McCain. The two famous speeches are analyzed from the perspective of mood, modality, and the personal pronoun system.

Key words: Interpersonal meaning; Presidential election; Speech

JIN Pengsun, LU Fengfeng (2013). A Contrastive Study of Political Speeches in Presidential Election of Interpersonal Meaning. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 6(3), 79-83. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130603.5269>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130603.5269>

INTRODUCTION

Halliday (1970) holds that the context of a situation is divided into three categories: field, tenor and mode. Then, Halliday states that language has three metafunctions: experiential, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. Each of the three metafunctions presents one aspect of the world and each metafunction is related with a different mode of meaning of clauses. The language users can establish and assume their position in social relationships through the interpersonal metafunction, and it is related with clauses as exchange.

As one of the three important meanings of the metafunction, the study of interpersonal meaning has drawn the attention of many linguists. Up to now, many linguists have made many achievements on it from different aspects, such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis and so on. In terms of Systemic-Functional Grammar, Halliday (1985, 1994), proposes that interpersonal function can be realized by principal lexical grammatical systems: mood, modality and key. According to him, the interpersonal function is used to enable us to participate in communicative acts with other people, to take on roles, and to express and understand feelings, attitudes, judgment. In this way, people play different roles to interact with one another and express their ideas about things so as to affect even to change their ideas, to establish relationship with others.

This paper aims to help readers have a better understanding of the reason why Obama performs better than McCain in their election speeches from the aspect of the analysis of interpersonal meaning, which is hoped to provide some useful guidance for the readers with regard to how to make better speech to realize their purpose.

1. BARACK OBAMA AND MCCAIN'S ELECTION SPEECH

There were two election speeches of the two presidential candidates of the American election in 2008, which is Obama's speech in the state of Florida and McCain's speech in the state of Ohio. Both speeches touched upon every aspect of the nation, both mentioned the economic crisis of the United States and pointed out their plans to recover their nation's prosperity. Both are inspirational, encouraging the people by telling them that although the country was probably in the darkest days, there was hope, there was a chance to turn it around. However, there are still many differences if we compare the two election

speeches from the aspect of interpersonal meaning in terms of mood, modality and person pronoun.

2. INTERPERSONAL METAFUNCTION ANALYSIS OF BARRACK OBAMA'S AND MCCAIN'S ELECTION SPEECH

The Interpersonal Metafunction relates to text's aspects of tenor or interactivity. Like field, tenor comprises three component areas: the speaker/writer persona, social distance and relative social status. And social distance and relative social status are applicable only to spoken texts. Therefore, social distance and relative social status could be apprehended where there is only one author. The speaker persona concerns the stance, personalization and standing of the speaker. This involves judging whether the speaker has a neutral attitude, which can be seen through the use of positive or negative language. Social distance means how close the speakers' relationships are, e.g. how the use of nicknames shows the degree to which they are intimate. Relative social status asks whether they are equal in terms of power and knowledge on a subject, for example, the relationship between a mother and child would be considered unequal. Focuses here are on speech acts, who chooses the topic, turn management, and how capable both speakers are.

The Interpersonal Metafunction of a speech not only refers to the way speakers and audiences interact, the language use to establish and maintain the relations among them, but also means to influence their behaviors, to express our opinions about the world around us. The Interpersonal Metafunction mainly concerns the relation between the role of speakers and the role of audience, mood and modality.

In order to make the readers have a better understanding of Barack Obama's and McCain's election speeches, this paper makes an analysis of the two speeches from the perspective of the Interpersonal Metafunction by analyzing Mood, Modality and Pronoun. And through making the comparison of the Barack Obama's and McCain's election speeches, the readers can better understand the different characteristics of the two speakers, which gives the readers some enlightenments why Obama is a better speaker.

2.1 Mood

In order to keep a communication continuing, the Mood is of importance for carrying out the Interpersonal Metafunction of the clause as exchange in English. Mood is made up of Subject and Finite (Thompson 2000, p.41).

As for the roles of the speaker and the audience, the most fundamental types of speech roles are: (1) giving, and (2) demanding. Giving refers to the speaker who is giving something to the listener or the speaker is inviting the listener to receive. Demanding refers to the speaker

who is requiring something from the listener or the speaker is asking the listener to give. In other words, the speaker is not only doing something himself; he is also demanding something from the listener. And the commodity exchanged can be grouped into two kinds: (1) goods-and-services; (2) information. The speech roles and commodity exchanged can make four speech functions, which are statement, question, offer and command. All the four primary speech functions are related with the grammatical structure. Statements can be realized by declarative clause, problem is related to the interrogative clause and command is associated with the imperative clause.

By statistics, there are 189 clauses and 171 clauses in Obama's and McCain's election speech respectively, in which declarative clauses are 184 sentences and 171 sentences, accounting for 97.35% and 83.62% in the two election speeches accordingly. This statistics shows that declarative is the main form of both Obama's and McCain's election speeches. Both candidates try to offer enough information and messages to the audiences in order to make them know their political attitudes and their blueprints for the United States. Besides, the two speakers want to attract the attention of the audience, arouse them to take immediate action to help revive the nation, convince the audiences trust their capability to make the change, encourage the supporters to live through the difficulties under the leadership with them. However, some differences can be noticed which are worth our attention. Although both candidates have criticized each other, Obama pays more attention to America's current serious situation and those problems to be solved. What Obama talked about his country includes economy, politics, education, security and so on. He is more concerned about every aspect of Americans. By contrast, what McCain talks more in his speech is about how to criticize Obama in every detail. In his speech, there are about 19 times McCain have mentioned about Obama. For example, "*Senator Obama is running to be Redistributionist in Chief. I'm running to be Commander in Chief. Senator Obama is running to spread the wealth.*" (McCain)

In the example, McCain criticizes Obama's saying that if you don't want to pay higher taxes you are quoted "selfish". Here McCain hopes to cut taxes and create jobs for Americans. As McCain comes from Republican Party and he represents the interests of those rich Americans. Therefore, he strongly proposes to decrease tax upon those rich people.

It can be noticed that what McCain concerns most is to give constant judgments on his opponent. And readers are easily given the impression that McCain is good at judging others instead of doing well in thinking out plans on how to settle the problems facing America. He has ignored the fact that most of Americans are willing to support those candidates who has the capability of saving

the country if they are elected. Therefore, perhaps Obama performs better than McCain in this aspect.

2.2 Modality

Modality is often used to reflect the speaker's attitude. As one important part of interpersonal meaning, it is the key approach to realize interpersonal meaning. According to Halliday (1994), modality can be regarded as a speaker's understanding of a state, emotion, and attitude towards his will, revealing the speaker's estimation and uncertainty to the recognition of things. Through the analysis of various types of modality, the speaker's attitudes, assessment or purposes could be better understood.

In traditional grammar, modality is mainly realized by modal operators, which are also called modal auxiliary. Modal operators include *could, can, will, may, might, would, shall, should, ought to, have to* and so on. According to Halliday (1994), there are three basic values of modal operators which are high, median and low modal operators. And different scales of modal operators have different meanings.

By statistics, 67 modal operators and 43 modal operators are employed in Barrack Obama and McCain's election speech respectively, and the most frequent appeared ones are as the followings: in Obama's speech, "will" turns up 28 times, accounting for 41.79%, "can" is used 16 times, taking up 23.88%, and "should" appeared 6 times, covering 8.95%; while in McCain's speech, "will" turns up 31 times, accounting for 72.09%, "need" is adopted 5 times, taking up 11.63%, and "would" appeared 3 times, covering 6.97%. Therefore, *will, can, and should* appear most frequently in Obama's speech; while *will, need, and would* appear most frequently in McCain's speech. Then, it can be found that the median modal operators, in Obama and McCain's election speeches, both take up the largest percent, which have 37 modal operators and 35 modal ones in the two candidates' speeches, accounting for 55.22% and 81.39% respectively, which means that both Obama and McCain tend to avoid being too aggressive when they express their views. In Obama's speech, low value modal operators covers 0% and high value modal operators account for 18.6%. However, McCain is less likely to say anything that is uncertain comparing with Obama, and McCain is relatively more aggressive than Obama.

Will, as a maker of the future tense, appears most frequently in both Obama and McCain's election speeches. There are 28 instances of *will* in Obama's speech and 31 instances of *will* in McCain's speech. According to Lyons (1996, p.310), *will* has two meanings: the first meaning for *will* is to supply information about what will happen in the future on the basis of the speaker's prediction, beliefs or intentions. The second meaning for *will* is employed in sentences with a modal use of the "permissive", in which the speaker puts himself forward as the guarantor of the truth or the occurrence of the event he refers to.

In presidential candidates' election speeches, *will* is often adopted to help the candidate win the support from the audience by making a series of promises. For example:

(2). "That's how we'll change this country- with your help." (Obama)

(3). "When I am president, we are going to win in Iraq and win in Afghanistan, and our troops will come home with honor." (McCain)

With regard to low value modal operators, which are adopted 20 times, it takes the second place in Obama's speech. *Can* takes the lead among the low value modal operators, covering 23.88%. In traditional grammar, *can* contains three different meanings. For the first meaning, *can* is used to express possibility. And it can help the speaker to elicit hope from the audience and help him win support from them in the political speech. The second meaning of *can* is to show one's capability. In political speech, sometimes it can be used when the speaker deliver promise to the audience what they can do if they are elected president. The last meaning for *can* is to give permission. Look at the following two examples:

(4). "Tomorrow, at this defining moment in history, you can give this country the change we need." (Obama)

(5). "We can end it once and for all." (Obama)

In contrast, high value modal operators which are used 8 times take the second place in McCain's speech. "Need" takes the highest percent of all the high median modal ones. While *must*, in Obama's speech, takes the first place among the high value modal operators, accounting for 5.97%. According to Halliday (1994/2000) *must* carries the highest degree of obligation in the sphere of modulation, which implies that the speaker is in a position to lay the obligation and is thus in a position of some authority. Comparing with *must*, *need* is less peaceful in carrying mood. Look at the following examples:

(6). "Yes, government must lead the way on energy independence, but each of us must do our part to make our homes and our businesses more efficient." (Obama)

(7). "We need to win Ohio on November 4th, and with your help—we're going to win here, and bring real change to Washington." (McCain)

In example (6), the first *must* indicates that Obama warns the government to lead the way on the energy independence. The second *must* shows that Obama calls on the Americans to take actions to save energy. Here *must* helps Obama realize the power of an imagined president. While in example (7), *need* expresses McCain's belief that it is necessary to win the support from the people of Ohio if he wants to become the president. With the help of the people of Ohio, some changes can be brought to America as a whole.

2.3 Personal Pronoun

According to Halliday (2000, p.191), personal system, including pronouns and possessives, can be employed to realize interpersonal meaning of language. There are three

types of personal pronouns. The first personal pronoun includes *I* and *we*. The second personal pronoun includes *you*. The third ones include *they* and *it*. In political speech, the interpersonal meaning exists in the communication between the speaker and the audience. When one is giving an address, the purpose of it is to inform, suggest and communicate. The choice of different personal pronouns has an effect on the audience. Because the choice of personal pronoun can clearly make the audience know the attitude of the speaker. It can reflect the social relationship between the speaker and audience.

2.3.1 First Personal Pronoun

Generally speaking, first personal pronoun includes singular form of personal pronoun “I” and the plural form “we”. “I” appeared 46 times in Obama’s speech, accounting for 26.43% and 38 times in McCain’s speech, taking up 38.38%. “I” takes the second place of all the personal ones in both Obama and McCain’s election speeches. The first personal pronoun “I” represents the speaker himself, and the speaker often adopts “I” to state his own personal views and feelings. Through the comparison, the author finds that the frequency of personal pronoun “I”, in McCain’s speech, is 12% higher than Obama. Therefore, it can be seen that McCain tends to use more “I” as subject to express his personal ideas than Obama. To some degree, McCain is relatively more subjective when delivering a speech. Look at the following examples:

(8). “*I promise you this—we will not just win Florida, we will not just win this election, but together, we will change this country and we will change the world.*”(Obama)

(9). “*I’ve been fighting for this country since I was seventeen years old, and I have the scars to prove it.*”(McCain)

In the first example, “I” was taken to indicate Obama’s promise to the Americans, namely to bring the new changes to the United States and the world. And in the second example, McCain adopts “I” to remind the audience of his experience in serving the army, which proves that he has been fighting for his country.

While the plural form of the first personal pronoun “we” takes the highest proportion among all the personal pronouns in both Obama and McCain’s speeches, accounting for nearly half of the percentage. *We* means a group of people including the people yourself. While in political speech, *we* refers to the speaker and all the audience together. The frequent use of *we* in political speech has the effect of making the audience feel that the speaker is on the side of the audience. In order to win the support from the audience, the presidential candidates often use *we* to show the close relationship between them. Look at the following examples:

(10). “*We are in the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.*”(Obama)

(11). “*We are going to win in Iraq and win in Afghanistan, and our troops will come home with honor.*”(McCain)

In the first example, *we* refers to all the Americans who are living in the economic crisis. Obama use *we* to tell all the audience about the situation of the America. And *we*, in the second example, refers to American as a whole. It states McCain’s confidence in winning the Iraqi war and Afghanistan war with the efforts of the American soldiers.

2.3.2 Second Personal Pronoun

The second personal pronoun—*you*, takes up the least percent among the three types of personal pronoun in both Obama and McCain’s election speeches. There are two forms of *you*, either singular or plural depending on the meanings of text. In political speech, *you* is used to refer to the audience or the targeted people absent. The second personal pronoun—*you* has two senses. The first is adopted to draw the audience’s attention, and the second sense is often used to separate the speaker from the audience and help the speaker establish his authority or status through being separated from the others. Look at the following examples:

(12). “*Tomorrow, at this defining moment in history, you can give this country the charge we need.*”(Obama)

In the example, *you* refers to the American people. Obama told all the Americans that they are the owners of their country and they have the rights to decide the future of America.

2.3.3 The Third Personal Pronoun “They”

The third personal pronoun “*they*” appeared 9 times in Obama’s speech, covering 5.17%, and 2 times in McCain’s speech, taking up 2.02% of the entire person pronoun. It can be seen that *they* didn’t appear frequently in the two candidates. In traditional grammar, *they* is often used to refer to those people who are absent. In political speech, *they* can have the effect of realizing interpersonal meaning. Look at the following examples:

(13). “*They haven’t worked, and it’s time for change. That’s why I’m running for President of the United States.*”(Obama)

(14). “*Our troops are succeeding, and when I am President, they will come home in victory, not in defeat.*”(McCain)

3. THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

In summary, Halliday’s Systemic and Functional Grammar is adopted to make a comparative study of the two presidential candidates coming from the American Democratic Party and the Republic Party respectively by analyzing their election speeches. Through the careful study of mood system in Obama and McCain’s

election speeches, it can be noticed that mood system is of importance in realizing interpersonal meaning in the two candidates' speeches, and declarative serves the function of conveying information. However, the two candidates' focus of giving information is quite different. Obama tends to focus on his plans to settle the problems facing the United States, while McCain makes effort on criticizing his opponent. Generally speaking, the audience tends to trust the candidate who is more concerned with how to deal with the difficulties rather than those people who only cares to criticize his opponent. In terms of imperative, the relatively frequent use of imperative in McCain's speech, to some degree, is related with McCain's personal experience of serving the army in his early years.

Second, through the analysis of modality in Obama and McCain's election speeches, it can be seen that modality system also conveys interpersonal meaning through modal operators and modal adjuncts. With regard to modal operators, it is found that median modal operators are the most frequent ones among the three types of modal operators in both Obama and McCain's election speeches. It can be seen that Obama and McCain try to avoid being too aggressive when they express their viewpoints. With regard to low median operators, Obama's low value ones take the second largest percent in his speech, while McCain doesn't use any low value modal operator at all. According to functional grammar, low value modal operators give people the feelings of uncertainty. Thus, it can be noticed that McCain is less likely to say anything that is uncertain. As for the high value modal operator, it is found that the frequency of McCain's high value ones in McCain's speeches is 4%

higher than that in Obama's speech. The relatively high use of high value modal operators in McCain's speech, to some degree, indicates that McCain is more willing to give orders and make commands when speaking, which make the audience feel being dominated by him.

Third, by analyzing the personal system in Obama and McCain's election speeches, it can be noticed that personal system can also be employed to realize interpersonal meaning. Through the careful comparison of the distribution of personal pronouns, the adoption of *we* can help the speaker establish a close and harmonious relationship with the hearers. In this way, the candidate could get the trust and support from the hearers. The second personal pronoun *you* is the least one in frequency. The speaker doesn't use it frequently because *you* can give the audience the feeling of being referred and make the hearers feel being isolated from the speaker. The relatively frequent appearance of the third personal pronoun can make the speech sound more objective and convincing.

REFERENCES

- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1970). Language structure and language function. In Lyons, J. (Ed.), *New Horizons in Linguistics* (pp.140-165). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Thompson, G. (2000). *Introducing functional grammar*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Hu, Zhuanglin (2000). *On functional grammar*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research.
- Li, Zhanzi (2004). *The interpersonal study on discourse*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Teaching.