

The Interpersonal Functional Analysis of Taylor Swift's Commencement Address at New York University

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Abstract

As an American singer-songwriter, actress and music producer, Taylor Swift is known for her pop and country music compositions and considered as one of the most influential artists of the 21st century. Therefore, it is very meaningful to study the speeches delivered by famous musicians at graduation ceremonies. Based on the interpersonal function of Halliday's systemic functional grammar, this paper takes Taylor Swift's commencement address at New York University in 2022 as the corpus, analyzes the interpersonal meaning of the address from three angles including mood system, modality system as well as personal pronoun system, aiming to reveal how the speaker chose the appropriate language means to realize the interpersonal meaning in the address, and then achieve the purpose of the address.

Keywords

Taylor Swift; Commencement address; Systemic functional grammar; Interpersonal function; 2022

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Speeches are not only a language art, but also an important activity of human communication. In speeches, a variety of language means are utilized to convey views, ideas, and insights to audience, mobilize their emotions, guide them to resonate, and thus achieve the purpose of the speeches. A good speech can not only provoke people's deep reflection, but also shock their hearts. Speeches can be divided into many kinds according to different ways, such as political speeches, street speeches, campus speeches and so on. As a kind of speech, commencement speeches express universities' ardent hope and good wishes for their graduates. Commencement speeches are an important way to clarify stances, elaborate point of views and publicize ideas in front of the audience in the public place, and are an major form of public speech. They are also the main way to show personal eloquence, profound knowledge and personality charm of the speaker. As an important activity officially held by universities, graduation ceremonies not only embody the most prominent humanistic spirit of the whole universities but also embody the ardent expectations and good wishes of the universities for the graduating students.

In the late 1950s, systemic functional grammar was constructed by Halliday, which provided a new powerful theoretical framework for discourse analysis. The systemic function school (2005) believed that language was the product of human social activities, and as a tool of human communication, language served various functions. As a representative of systemic functional linguistics, Halliday (2000) pointed out that there were three major meta-functions of language composed of ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. As one of the three meta-functions of language, interpersonal function plays a key role in explanation of the relationship between people and has been widely used in the analysis of various texts. At first, the study of interpersonal function focused on autobiography, poetry, advertising, news, novels

and other texts. In recent years, speech discourses have been favored by plenty of scholars, especially political speech discourse of domestic and foreign leaders. However, detailed researches on the interpersonal function of commencement speeches are rare. Graduation speeches are a public speech for the majority of graduates. On the one hand, they carry strong campus cultures, on the other hand, they are full of the speaker's wishes and expectations for the students. Therefore, commencement speeches will be organized carefully, arranged rationally and language will be skillfully used in order to achieve the purposes of inspiration, motivation, and influence of the audience. It is of great importance to study the American commencement addresses from the angle of interpersonal function.

1.2. The objectives and significance of the study

Grounded in the interpersonal function of Halliday's systemic functional grammar, this paper chooses Taylor Swift's 20-minute, 2,700-word commencement address at New York University as the corpus, conducts analyses of how Taylor realized the interpersonal function of the text through the choice of mood, modality and personal pronouns in the commencement address in order to reveal the significant role that interpersonal function plays in the commencement address and how the speaker forged connections with the audience. By means of analysis of the commencement address, this paper seeks to reveal the methods utilized to achieve interpersonal function effectively.

Theoretically, this study enriches the study of interpersonal function. Practically, this study helps the audience interpret the language connotation and spirits delivered in the address better and helps readers appreciate the address better and write better addresses in the future.

2. Literature review

2.1. Three meta-functions of language

The Halliday is a contemporary English linguist, an outstanding representative in the field of linguistics and a master of language. Systemic functional linguistics created by Halliday has a wide and profound influence on contemporary linguistics and applied linguistics in the world. It is on a par with formal linguistics represented by Chomsky and cognitive linguistics represented by Rykoff. There are three meta-functions of language including ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. Ideational function refers to that people use language to describe the things, events and processes existing in the subjective and objective world, and to conceptualize and define them. In the category of language, construal approaches of ideational function are dominated by transitivity, normalization and voice. Interpersonal function. It is divided into experiential function representing the material world and the inner world through language and logical function from the relationship between people and culture. Logical function is a cognitive logical expression that presents a linear horizontal structure to the juxtaposition or subordination between the two. Interpersonal function refers to the use of language to carry out meaningful allocation of communicative resources and is a means of doing things to understand the world, understand the world, and transform the world. The construal approach of interpersonal function is embodied by mood, modality and key. From the perspective of interpersonal function, language is regarded as a means of communication and exchange of ideas to maintain human interaction and promote human development. Textual function refers to the mechanism by which people organize information and extract information value through language. The construal means of textual function is realized by theme, information and cohesion. Textual function is the integration of ideational function and interpersonal function from the relationship between human and the world to form textual consciousness and semantic context so as to realize the cognitive thinking of the world and regulate human behavior through language.

2.2. Previous studies on interpersonal function at home and abroad

Interpersonal function of language has been extensively studied from various perspectives by plentiful scholars over a long period.

Thompson (1996) argued that interpersonal function could be divided into two parts: individual and interaction, and individual speech could produce evaluative meaning and modal meaning. Both evaluative meaning and modal meaning are related to the speaker's personal judgment and attitude, and there is a continuum between judgment and attitude, and there is a ratio between this continuum, which can be embodied in the form of mood, words and sentence patterns. Halliday (2000) believed that a speaker used specific linguistic structures in social communication to fulfill the communicative role, that was, his statement, attitude, evaluation and the constructed relationship between him and the listener. In interpersonal communication, interpersonal meaning was realized through mood system and modality system. The mood system was the way to establish and maintain the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the listener, while modality was mostly used to express the attitude towards the proposal or proposition (Halliday, 2004). Therefore, mood and modality help people better understand how interpersonal meaning is achieved through the language system. Wang Zhenhua (2001) introduced the origin, background and theoretical frame and operation of the evaluation system in detail in the book named *Evaluation System and Its Operation: The New Development of Systemic Functional Linguistics*. On the basis of proving that there were evaluation phenomena in vocabulary level, he put forward the question of whether there was evaluation phenomenon in clause level and different article types. Chang Chenguang (2002) made a preliminary attempt to study the interpersonal meaning of English idioms corpus based on the three meta-functions of systemic functional linguistics and noted that the use of English idioms played an important role in reflecting the interaction between the two communicators, negotiating the relationship between the two, and expressing personal attitudes and evaluations. Eggins and Slade (2004) studied the ways of realizing interpersonal meaning of different text themes, and held that people's social identity, their relationship with each other and their own attitude could be reflected by the language they used, and people's choice of modal types could help reflect the social identity and social role of the listener and the speaker. Eggins and Slade has provided a correct research method for the study of interpersonal meaning of dialogue texts for later linguists with profound influence. Liu Meilian (2006) demonstrated the operability and applicability of interpersonal function of systemic functional linguistics in the analysis of poetry. She proved that interpersonal meaning could be embodied by the mood, communicative role and tense in the poem Farewell, which had important implications for the study of English translation corpus of the following Chinese text. ZhangLan (2011) analyzed three types of Chinese translation of Frost's poem Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening from the angles of mood, modality and appraisal and utilized appraisal theory to enrich the realization of interpersonal function. Huang Guowen (2018) studied how the poet expressed the theme of poetry and his attitude towards nature through language from the perspective of meta-function and grammatical metaphor, and demonstrated once again the applicability and operability of systemic functional linguistics in the process of analyzing literary works.

2.3. Previous studies on commencement address at home and abroad

Though there have been many studies involved in commence address, studies on interpersonal function of commencement address are rare.

Robert (1987) conducted a study of the content of a commencement address and stated that practical information was much more preferred than a congratulatory address with vacant contents. Dean (1992) took Barbara Bush's 1990 commencement address at Wellesley College as the corpus, analyzed the address from the perspective of forensics in detail, which elaborated

rhetoical sensitivity and acute awareness of the audience. Magolda (2003) offered an anthropological perspective for readers to understand and appreciate the commencement address and campus culture by means of conducting analyses of commencement ritual and culture effects of the university. Hua Weiyong (2010) compared Chinese commencement addresses with American commencement addresses, found that the difference between the two were very obvious, not only in structural mode, ideological content, but also in rhetoric and language style and argued that these differences stemmed from the choice of commencement speakers. He also noted that commencement address speakers in Chinese universities were usually the universities' presidents, while American universities usually invite well-known individuals from all walks of life to be the speakers. Some insights can be provided through analysis of the differences between the two. Zhang Huizhen (2013) took Obama's commencement address at Ohio State University in 2013 as an example and studied how Obama strategically chose different personal pronouns to maintain his approachable image and win trust and respect when faced with the elites who would dominate American society in the future. Zhang Yuke (2016) investigated 9 commencement addresses published in China Daily and found that in commencement address, the proportion of vocabulary and sentences expressing positive attitudes was much higher than that of negative vocabulary and sentences so it would more valuable and meaningful to study commencement addresses from the perspective of positive discourse analysis. Deng Sirui (2019) selected 34 outstanding Harvard commencement speeches delivered between 1947 and 2012. Based on ethos and pathos of rhetorical persuasion, these commencement speeches were analyzed with combination of translation methods and strategies. Liu Yuying (2023) chose multimodal discourse analysis as the comprehensive theoretical framework, took universities presidents' commencement addresses as the examples of multimodal discourse and conducted multimodal discourse analysis towards these addresses. She found that commencement addresses mainly included visual modes and auditory modes, among which the speaker's speech was the main mode mainly in the foreground position. In order to effectively achieve the communicative purpose of an address and achieve good effects, the main mode should be supplemented or strengthened by body movements, facial expressions and background pictures in the visual mode.

In conclusion, commencement addresses have attracted plentiful scholars to study from a variety of angles. However, there are few studies on interpersonal function of commencement addresses, leaving research space for us. It is of great significance to conduct a study of interpersonal function of commencement addresses.

3. Theoretical framework

Interpersonal function refers to speakers' communication, establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationship by means of language. People can use language to express identity, status, attitude, motivation, or behavior that influences others. Interpersonal function of language can be realized by three major systems, namely, mood system, modality system and personal pronoun system. Mood system consists of subject and finite element. According to the different positions of subject and finite element, three kinds of mood were distinguished by Halliday. They are respectively declarative mood, interrogative mood and imperative mood. Mood can not only express the attitude of a speaker, but also reflect the power relationship between the speaker and his listener. Modality system is a semantic system that expresses a speaker's judgment and evaluation of things. Modality system is divided into modalization and modualization. There are low, medium and high values of modality. High value of modality indicates that the strong attitude and firm stand of a speaker, which highlights the speaker's higher social status. Low value of modality indicates the humility and politeness of a speaker, and sometimes reflects uncertainty about the content of what the speaker says. The use of

personal pronouns can not only indicate a speaker’s attitude towards the listener but also reveal the affinity between the two parties. Proper selection of personal pronouns can help narrow the emotional distance between speakers and listeners and establish a close and harmonious interpersonal relationship between the two sides.

4. Interpersonal functional analysis of Taylor Swift’s commencement address at New York University

4.1. The analysis of mood system

Mood system reflects the roles of both parties in communication. The speech role of speakers has two basic tasks: giving and taking. There are two kinds of communicative objects in communication, the first is goods and services, and the second is information. The combination of speech roles and communication objects can form four kinds of speech characters including provision, statement, command and interrogation, which are complicatedly related to mood system. Statement, command and interrogation are respectively realized by declarative sentences, imperative sentences and interrogative sentences. However, provision is achieved by different mood types. In the process of addresses, speakers will provide the audience with a lot of information they want to express and meanwhile speakers also hope to have a certain influence on the audience’s thoughts and even behaviors through their addresses. Therefore, the two roles of “giving” and “taking” are also reflected in the addresses. The mood types in Taylor Swift’s commencement address at New York University are collected and presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Mood types in Taylor Swift’s commencement address at New York University

Mood type	Frequency	Proportion
Declarative mood	135	90.60%
Interrogative mood	5	3.35%
Imperative mood	9	6.05%
Total	149	100%

As is shown in Table 1, there are totally 149 sentences in the Taylor Swift’s commencement address at New York University with 135 declarative sentences, 5 interrogative sentences and 9 imperative sentences. Declarative sentences account for 90.60 percent of the whole commencement address, which is the highest. Imperative sentences occupy 6.05 percent. And the proportion of interrogative sentences is 3.35 percent, which is the lowest.

4.1.1. Declarative mood

Taylor Swift’s commencement address at New York University was dominated declarative sentences, which the speaker used to express statement, command and suggestion. Taylor Swift used a large number of declarative sentences to convey clear and powerful information and express ideas and experience clearly. For instance, at the beginning of the commencement address, Taylor Swift expressed her sincere gratitude to the university, family, friends, and colleagues. Such declarative sentences are used to convey gratitude, which can bring out resonance, create a positive atmosphere, enhance the commencement affinity and make the commencement address more moving and powerful. Some representative sentences are presented as follows:

I’d like to say a huge thank you to NYU’s Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Bill Berkeley and all the trustees and members of the board, NYU’s President Andrew Hamilton, Provost Katherine Fleming, and the faculty and alumni here today who have made this day possible. If they are here in this stadium, I hope you’ll find your own way to express your gratitude for all the steps and missteps that have led us to this common destination.

4.1.2. Interrogative mood

In the commencement address, Taylor Swift used a total of 5 interrogative sentences. The application of interrogative mood can stimulate the interest, mobilize the enthusiasm, concentrate the attention of the audience, guide the audience thinking, so as to establish an effective interactive relationship and promote the realization of the intentions of the address. However, excessive use of interrogative mood can weaken the power of an address, lower its credibility and seriousness. Therefore, Taylor Swift chose interrogative sentences carefully. One representative example is chosen as follows:

How do I give advice to this many people about their life choices?

4.1.3. Imperative mood

Imperative sentences are usually used to express command, request and advice. Such sentences can directly appeal to the audience, arouse the enthusiasm of the audience, and enhance the appeal of the words. In the commencement address, request and advice of imperative mood is appropriately used to express requirements and suggestions for graduates so as to establish a relationship of mutual trust and equality with them and make her ideas more acceptable to them. For example:

Secondly, learn to live alongside cringe.

In summary, Taylor Swift paid attention to the flexible use of three mood types, timely and effectively mobilize the scene atmosphere, stimulate graduates' enthusiasm, and inspire them to think so as to make the address deeply rooted in their hearts.

4.2. The analysis of modality system

According to Halliday, modality system is one of the important means to realize interpersonal meaning in language. Modality system is divided into modalization and modulation. Modalization is used to express the possibility of a proposition while modulation is used to express the possibility of a proposal. This study focuses on modal operators, which can effectively convey speakers' intention to the audience. Modality value can be divided into three levels: high, median and low. Modal operators are divided based on how close they are to yes and no. Modal operators with high modality value include "must, ought to, need to and have to". "Will, would, shall and should" belong to modal operators with median modality value. Modal operators with low modality value contain "may, might, can and could". Proper application of modal operators can inspire and persuade the audience.

Table 2 The distribution of modality value in Taylor Swift's commencement address at New York University

Modality value	Frequency	Proportion	Modal operators	Frequency
Low	9	15.52%	can	4
			could	3
			might	2
Median	40	68.96%	will	23
			would	15
			should	2
High	9	15.52%	have to	5
			can not	4
Total	58	100%		58

From Table 2, it can be seen that modal operators appeared 58 times in the commencement address. Modal operators with median modality value are the most popular, accounting for 68.96 percent. Modal operators with high and low modality value account for 15.52 percent

respective. Modal operators with low modality value generally express a lower degree of certainty, but their content is more objective and acceptable. Taylor Swift believed that graduates, after entering society, could change the future and improve the world by starting from reality, focusing on current challenges and difficulties, and using their own wisdom, professional abilities, and creativity. Modal operators with median modality value have higher certainty compared with modal operators with low modality value, which can enhance the persuasiveness of a speech. Given that the target audience of the speech are graduates who are about to enter society, Taylor Swift often used the modal operator “will” to convey bad things graduates would encounter in future and persuade them to keep optimistic. Modal operators with high modality value can make the audience feel stressed. But proper application of such modal operators can highlight the intention and emphases of an address. Taylor Swift used “have to” and “can not” to persuade graduates to remember good things and let the rest go. Here are some examples:

And I’m not gonna lie, these mistakes will cause you to lose things.
You can’t carry all things, all grudges, all updates on your ex, all enviable promotions your school bully got at the hedge fund his uncle started.

4.3. The analysis of personal pronoun system

Li Zhanzi (2002) believed that personal pronouns have the function of realization of interpersonal meaning. Personal pronouns reflect the degree of closeness between speakers and the listeners to some extent. Appropriate use of personal pronouns is conducive to narrowing the distance between speakers and listeners, establishing close interpersonal relationships, and achieving speakers’ pragmatic intentions. The distribution of personal pronouns of the address is collected as follows.

Table 3 The distribution of personal pronouns in Taylor Swift’s commencement address at New York University

	First-personal pronoun		Second-personal pronoun	Third-personal pronoun	
Personal pronoun	I/me/my	We/us/our	you/your/yours	It	They/them/their
Frequency	156	42	63	44	19
Proportion	48.14%	12.96%	19.44%	13.58%	5.88%
Total proportion	61.10%		19.44%	19.46%	

It can be seen from Table 3 that Taylor Swift used first-personal pronouns most frequently in the commencement address, accounting for 61.10 percent. Second-personal pronouns and third-personal pronouns respectively account for 29.44 percent and 19.46 percent. The speaker used a large amount of first-personal pronouns to expressing her ideas, share personal feelings, and place sincere expectations so as to achieve pragmatic empathy, narrow the psychological distance with the audience, and make the speech sincere, natural, authentic, and persuasive. The second-personal pronouns used in the commencement address referred specifically to graduates. Such personal pronouns have clear directionality, which can attract the attention of the audience and remind them to pay attention to the uncertainty and change of life.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study analyzed the interpersonal function of Taylor Swift’s commencement address at New York University from three angles including mood system, modality system and

personal pronoun system. The major findings are that in mood system, Taylor Swift preferred the use of declarative sentences to motivate graduates with the own experiences to inspire them to meet the challenges ahead with a positive attitude and a strong determination. In modality system, modal operators with median and low modality value are used, making the entire address approachable yet influential. In personal pronoun system, first-personal pronouns and second-personal pronouns are much more used to express thoughts and meanwhile stimulate students' thinking.

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