
RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Analysis of a TED Speech from the Perspective of Interpersonal Meta-function

Mao Yingxian

College of Foreign Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Corresponding Author: Mao Yingxian, **E-mail:** nadiamao@163.com

ABSTRACT

Under the guidance of the interpersonal meta-function theory of systemic functional grammar, this paper studied the mood, modality, and personal pronouns of a TED speech and drew the following conclusions: speakers more often used declarative sentences to convey information, more often used the first person to narrow the distance with the audience, and more often used low-value and median-value modal verbs to reduce the sense of pressure on the audience, which is conducive to the acceptance of the speaker's views. It is hoped that the above conclusions can be helpful for people who are starting to learn how to deliver a speech.

KEYWORDS

Interpersonal meta-function; Mood; Person; Modality; Speech; TED

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1. Introduction

People always live in a certain social relationship, so it is hard for us to avoid communication and exchange with others. As a result, in order to better facilitate our daily life, work and study, we need to practice and try to master good language organization and expression skills. Speech is a good way to improve people's comprehensive language ability. It can exercise the speaker's eloquence, help the speaker gradually develop self-confidence, and also help train the speaker's logical thinking. Delivering a speech is not easy, which requires speakers to learn some good speaking techniques and then practice them again and again. Beginners in public speaking can start by watching videos of excellent speakers to learn their methods of speaking and imitate those speakers. At the same time, keeping listening to the speeches of excellent speakers is also conducive to learning the methods of speech writing, which can make the content of the speech more attractive to the audience. TED, an organization, has created a platform for sharing and exchanging ideas, and many outstanding figures share their views through speeches on this platform, creating many wonderful speeches, which are suitable for beginners to learn and cultivate interest in public speaking.

Good writing ability is the basis for excellent speeches, so this paper will choose one of the many excellent TED Talks as the research object, analyze the speech from the three perspectives of person, mood and modality under the guidance of Halliday's theory of interpersonal meta-function in systemic functional grammar and then summarize the writing characteristics of the speech. I hope this can provide suggestions and inspiration for beginners to write a good speech and improve their speech ability.

2. Literature review

Many scholars have done a lot of research from the perspective of interpersonal function. Chen & Zhou (2023) took applied linguistics journal papers as an example to study the interpersonal function of comparative markers. Wu & Cai (2023) conducted a study on the manifestation of interpersonal functions of opera addresses through a self-built parallel corpus of Peking Opera The Legend of the White Snake. Wang & Xiong (2022) took the classroom language of excellent primary school teachers as the research object to analyze the positive classroom interpersonal meaning expressed by teachers using interrogative tone. From

the perspective of interpersonal function in systemic functional grammar, Weng & Wang (2019) studied the translation of appraised modal adverbs from the English version of *Besieged City*. Zhang (2009) used the theory of systemic functional grammar to specifically analyze the interpersonal functions of mood modality system in realizing the purpose of English commercial advertising. At the same time, many scholars analyze the interpersonal function of speech (Ye, 2010; Nur, 2015; Yang, 2017; Hulu, 2019). Bilal (2012) also analyzed story from the perspective of interpersonal function.

3. Theoretical framework

Halliday developed systemic functional grammar and proposed that language has three major meta-functions, namely ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. Ideational function means that people can use language to express their experience of the world and to describe events and states (Thompson, 2014: 28). Interpersonal function means that people can use language to communicate with others, establish and maintain appropriate interpersonal relationships, and influence others' behavior (Huang, 2002: 34). Discourse function means that people can organize language into a series of discourses with coherence and cohesion.

Halliday (1994) pointed out that the interpersonal function of language is realized through mood, personal pronouns and modality. The mood system is composed of "subject" and "finite". The mood can reflect the role of the speaker and the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Mood is divided into declarative mood, interrogative mood and imperative mood. The declarative mood is used to state a fact or pass on information. The interrogative mood indicates that the speaker asks a question and wishes to know some information from the addressee. The imperative mood can reflect the speaker's attitude in making orders, suggestions and requests and can prompt the addressee to take action.

Modality reflects the speaker's attitude. Modal words are divided into three levels of values: high, median and low. The higher the value of modal verbs, the stronger the tone expressed by the speaker; on the contrary, the lower the value, the more euphemistic the tone. High-value modal verbs include must, ought to, need, has/had to and their negative forms. Median-value modal verbs include a will, would, should, is/was to and their negative forms. Low-value modal verbs include can, may, might, dare, could and their negative forms.

The use of personal pronouns can not only refer to one side of the conversation, but also reflect the social relationship between the two sides of the conversation. Personal pronouns are divided into the first person, the second person and the third person. The first personal pronouns include I, me, my, we, us, our, mine, ours, myself, ourselves. The second personal pronouns include you, your, yours, yourself and yourselves. The third personal pronouns include he, she, it, him, her, his, her, hers, himself, herself, itself, they, them, their, theirs, themselves.

4. Data collection and analysis

This study will choose a speech from TED Talks entitled "Inside the mind of a master procrastinator" as the research object. This speech has a total of 2231 words and 138 sentences, mainly talking about the system of people who procrastinate. At the end of the article, the author hopes that people can be alert to procrastination and take action on important things as soon as possible. After applying quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and sort out the data, this paper will analyze and discuss the data from the three levels of person, mood and modality, and finally summarize the characteristics of speech writing.

4.1 Mood

As mentioned above, the interpersonal meta-function of systemic functional grammar divides mood into three types: declarative, imperative, and interrogative. Each mood conveys different attitudes of the speaker, especially in speech. The speaker's choice of moods will directly affect the audience's understanding of the speech content.

Declarative mood is usually used to convey information in the form of declarative sentences. The declarative mood is more moderate, and the use of declarative sentences in the speech can not only fully express the ideas and opinions that the speaker wants to convey to the audience, but also make the content of the speech easier to accept by the audience. The interrogative mood is used to express the speaker's questions in the form of interrogative questions, which can catch the listeners' attention and trigger their thinking and curiosity, so that the audience is more willing and patient to continue listening to the content of the speech. At the same time, the process of questioning and answering is also conducive to enhancing the interaction between the audience and the speaker. The imperative mood, expressed in the imperative sentence, is used to make requests, orders and advice, which is a way for speakers to call on the audience, hoping that the audience can identify with and accept the views conveyed by them, and can take corresponding actions.

The imperative mood is highly motivated. Table 1 below shows the distribution of mood in this speech:

Mood	Declarative	Interrogative	Imperative
Number	122	13	3
Frequency	88.41%	9.42%	2.17%

Table 1 The distribution of mood

It can be seen from Table 1 that in this speech, the speaker used the declarative mood most, followed by the interrogative mood, and rarely used the imperative mood. The speech itself is a two-way interactive process between the speaker's transmission of information and the audience's reception of information. The declarative mood is relatively moderate and will not cause a sense of oppression, which is more conducive to the expression and acceptance of the speaker's views. Here is an example of declarative mood used in speeches:

Example 1: A couple of years ago, I decided to write about procrastination. My behavior has always perplexed the non-procrastinators around me, and I wanted to explain to the non-procrastinators of the world what goes on in the heads of procrastinators, and why we are the way we are.

In these sentences, the speaker used the declarative mood because he was narrating facts to the audience, conveying unknown information. The reason the speaker wrote about procrastination was that his non-procrastinator friends were very confused by his procrastination behavior, so it prompted him to explain to the world what's inside the heads of procrastinators and why they procrastinate. As mentioned earlier, declarative sentences are informative, and without declarative sentences, it will be difficult for the audience to understand the cause and effect of things and to have a complete understanding of the process of how things happen.

From Table 1, we know that the author not only used declarative mood, but also used some interrogative mood. The example 2 presents the interrogative mood used in the article:

Example 2: How hard could it be to walk up the stairs? No big deal, right? But then, the funniest thing happened. Those first few months? They came and went, and I couldn't quite do stuff.

As mentioned above in the speech, the speaker had made a good writing plan for the graduation thesis. The early stage of writing would be easy, and the difficulty would gradually increase in the later stage. In these sentences, the speaker put forward the ideas that the audience might have in the form of two consecutive questions from the perspective of the audience. After listening to the plan, people would think that completing the plan seemed to be as simple as "walking up the stairs". Then the speaker used "but" to make a turning point, and further used the interrogative sentence to ask a question, and finally gave the answer. The interrogative mood used by the speaker in these sentences is to directly put forward the audience's views through himself, which is conducive to enhancing the expression effect of the sentences, increasing the interaction with the audience, and generating resonance with the audience. Questions are good for capturing the audience's attention and increasing their curiosity, such as "Those few months?" This sentence creates a cliffhanger, and the audience would be curious about the next part of the story and would interact more actively with the speaker. By asking questions, the speaker interacted with the audience, made the audience think, and then increased the interest in the speech when the answer given was different from the audience's guess.

It can be seen from Table 1 that the imperative mood is rarely used in this speech, and there are only three imperative sentences. Here are two examples:

Example 3: Totally agree, but let's just open Google Earth ... so we can get a better feel for India.

Example 4: I know that if you're not a trained brain expert, it's not that obvious, but just take a look, OK?

From the above two examples, it can be seen that the speaker used the imperative mood to express suggestions and requests, and the mood was also euphemistic and moderate. Using the expression "take a look" to send a request along with "OK" wouldn't make the audience feel pressured or uncomfortable, so the listeners would be more willing to cooperate with the speaker. The expression "let's" is also a euphemistic way to make a suggestion, which is conducive to enhancing the audience's sense of participation and shortening the distance between the audience and the speaker.

To sum up, in this speech, the speaker used the declarative mood most, which was mainly used to describe facts and convey information. The interrogative mood was also used to attract the listeners' attention, arouse the listeners' thinking and increase positive interaction by raising questions. Although the imperative mood was rarely used, it could be used to politely express requests and suggestions in a way that was acceptable to the audience.

4.2 Person

In systemic functional grammar, personal pronouns are used to refer to people with different identities, and to mark the social relationship between the speaker and the listener (Zhou, 2023:45). Person is divided into the first person, the second person and the third person. The first person usually refers to the speaker and other people including the speaker. The second person refers to the listener and the third person refers to other people and things. In a speech, choosing the right personal pronouns is crucial to the expression effect of the speech. Speakers often use the first and second person to shorten the distance from the audience and better express their attitudes and opinions. The first person used in this speech includes "I, me, my, we, us, our, mine". The second person includes "you, your" and the third person includes "he, him, his, himself, it, they, them and their". Table 2 below shows the distribution of the person in this speech:

Table 2 The distribution of the person

Person	The first person	The second person	The third person
Number	104	34	72
Frequency	4.66%	1.52%	3.23%

As can be seen from Table 2, the speaker used the first person most, while the second person was used least in the speech. The use of the first person is conducive to establishing a friendly relationship with the listener, narrowing the psychological distance between the speaker and listeners, and making the audience more willing to listen to the content of the speech. Here are examples of the use of the first person in the speech:

Example 5: So in college, I was a government major, which means I had to write a lot of papers.

Example 6: We can visualize the future. We can see the big picture. We can make long-term plans.

In this speech, on the whole, the speaker mostly used the first person, and in the first personal pronouns "I" was the most frequently used, followed by the plural pronoun "we". In Example 5, the speaker used the first personal pronoun "I" at the beginning of the speech to introduce his major and his daily life of frequently writing papers to the audience, so that the audience could understand and get familiar with him, which was conducive to the narration of the subsequent content of the speech. Sharing the speaker's own story at the beginning of a speech to attract the audience's interest is a common method in a speech. Using the first-person "I" is a way for the speaker to tell the story through his own identity to facilitate the narration of the content of the speech. At the same time, the listener can tell his own story like a friend of the listeners, which will easily narrow the psychological distance with the audience.

In Example 6, the speaker used three plural personal pronouns "we" and pointed out what we humans are capable of compared to other animals. By using "we", the speaker pointed out the common points between himself and the audience, and regarded himself and the audience as the same whole. This will make the audience feel that the speaker is a person who can empathize with them. In this way, the psychological distance between speakers and the audience is shortened and the speakers' interaction with the audience is increased.

As can be seen from Table 2, in addition to the extensive use of the first person, the third person is also used frequently.

Example 7: He has no memory of the past, no knowledge of the future, and he only cares about two things: easy and fun.

Example 8: The frustration is not that they couldn't achieve their dreams; it's that they weren't even able to start chasing them.

The main purpose of this speech is to let the audience understand the heart of procrastinators and the reasons for their procrastination. The third person was used to facilitate the speaker to list other people and things and make objective statements. For example, in example 7, when introducing the Instant Gratification Monkey, which would lead to the procrastination, the speaker used the third person pronouns to refer to the monkey in order to provide a detailed description. In Example 8, the author referred to people from all over the world who had sent him emails saying that they suffer from procrastination, and revealed to the audience that these people's frustration came from procrastination preventing them from starting to pursue their dreams.

Compared to the first and third person, the second person was less used in this speech, but the use of the second person also played an important interactive role in the speech. This is an example of the second person used in the text.

Example 9: There's also all kinds of important things outside of your career that don't involve any deadlines, like seeing your family or exercising and taking care of your health, working on your relationship or getting out of a relationship that isn't working.

The second person was used to refer to the listeners, the person with whom the speaker was interacting. In example 9, the speaker used the second person as if in a daily chat with the audience, discussing the important things in life besides work, and finally advising the audience to get those important things done as soon as possible. Although a speech is a process in which most of the time the speaker expresses his or her ideas and opinions, the process is also a two-way interaction. The use of the second person by the speaker will help to narrow the distance between himself and the audience, make himself more friendly, and make his views more easily accepted by the audience to achieve the purpose of his speech.

To sum up, in this speech, the speaker used the first person most, which was conducive to resonating with readers and actively interacting with them. And the third person was used frequently, which was conducive to the objective statements of other people and things. The second person was the least used, but it helped to shorten the distance between the speaker and the audience, making the speaker's point of view more acceptable.

4.3 Modality

Fowler (1986) believes that the choice of modality reflects the speaker's power situation, and the use of modal verbs can shape the speaker's image from the aspects of attitude, emotion or power relationship. Modality can express the speaker's attitude when speaking (Halliday, 1994: 356), and modal verbs are the carriers of modality. Halliday (2004) divided modal verbs into three types: high-value modal verbs, median modal verbs and low-value modal verbs. High-value modal verbs refer to must, need and have/has to and their negative forms. Median-value modal verbs include will, would, shall and should and their negative forms. And low-value modal verbs include can, may, could and might and their negative forms. Table 3 shows the distribution of modal verbs of different value in speech.

Modality	High	Median	Low
Number	6	10	19
Frequency	0.27%	0.45%	0.85%

Table 3 The distribution of modal verbs

As can be seen from table 3, the speaker used more low-value and median-value modal verbs in their speeches, and less high-value modal verbs. Compared with high-value modal verbs, low-value and median-value modal verbs are more moderate, so they will not cause pressure on the audience, and the audience is more willing to listen to the content of the speech. The following is an example of low-value modal verbs used in the speech.

Example 10: We can visualize the future. We can see the big picture. We can make long-term plans.

In Example 10, the speaker used the low-value modal verb "can" to indicate "ability". In this passage, the speaker pointed out that human could "visualize the future, see the big picture and make long-term plans". The positive statement can show the audience what they are capable of and inspire them. In addition, by using the first personal plural pronoun, the speaker sees himself and the audience as a whole, which can arouse the resonance between the audience and the speaker.

In addition to low-value and median-value modal verbs, the speaker also used a small number of high-value modal verbs, mainly to make suggestions and encourage people to take action. Here are some examples of high-value modal verbs used in the speech.

Example 11: So I think we need to all take a long, hard look at that calendar. We need to think about what we're really procrastinating on, because everyone is procrastinating on something in life. We need to stay aware of the Instant Gratification Monkey.

The speaker used the high-value modal verb "need" to offer suggestions to listeners. He didn't choose other high-value modal verbs such as must, have to and has to. Because compared with these verbs, "need" is more moderate, which can make the suggestions more acceptable to listeners. At the same time, the use of high-value modal verbs in the speech can help to attract the attention of the listener, and will create a strong sense of pressure on the audience, prompting them to stop procrastinating and take action, so it is a way for the speaker to make suggestions to the audience.

To sum up, the speaker uses more low-value and median-value modal verbs in the speech. Their tone is relatively moderate, which will not cause a sense of pressure to the audience, and is conducive to the transmission and acceptance of speech views. High-value modal verbs, though used less frequently, can be used by the speaker to make suggestions to the audience and encourage them to take immediate action.

5. Conclusion

Using the interpersonal function theory of systemic functional grammar, this paper analyzed the mood, person and modality of a speech TED Talks, and drew the following conclusions: In terms of mood, the speaker mainly chose declarative mood to convey information, and used interrogative mood to interact with the audience. In terms of person, the speaker mainly used the first person to shorten the distance from the audience, and the third person to increase the interaction with the audience. In terms of modality, the speaker mostly used low-value modal verbs and median-value modal verbs to put forward their own views and reduce the sense of pressure on the audience. This paper analyzed the speech and summarized the above language characteristics, hoping to help speech lovers improve their writing ability and improve the expression effect of speech.

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Appendix

Speech Title	Speaker	Number of Words
Inside the mind of a master procrastinator	Tim Urban	2231 words