

# Analysis of Interpersonal Meaning in Public Speeches—A Case Study of Obama's Speech

Hao Feng

Beijing University of Technology, Beijing, China  
Email: fenghao@emails.bjut.edu.cn

Yuhui Liu

Beijing University of Technology, Beijing, China  
Email: liuyuhui@bjut.edu.cn

**Abstract**—This paper uses the opening speech given by president Obama at a prime time news conference commemorating his first 100<sup>th</sup> day in office as the sample and tries to explore how interpersonal meaning is achieved from the perspective of Functional Grammar and with the focus on mood, modal auxiliary, personal pronouns in pronoun system, and tense shift. The finding shows that Obama makes full use of the language to achieve his political purpose in his speech by using different devices to fulfill interpersonal meaning.

**Index Terms**—interpersonal meaning, mood, modal auxiliary, pronoun system, tense shift

## I. INTRODUCTION

Public speeches are delivered orally, which are often well-prepared in writing and presented on formal occasions. Based on the functions and contents, political speech is a kind of public speech given by authorities with political purposes that tries to influence a certain group of people. This paper uses the opening speech given by president Obama at a prime time news conference commemorating his first 100<sup>th</sup> day in office as the sample. Obama is the first black man to become the president, which is considered as a breakthrough in American history. He took charge of the US government in face of financial crisis and two wars disputes. As the first 100 days of presidency have begun to have symbolic significance since Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration and the period is considered a benchmark to measure the early success of a president, so the speech given on that day is of great importance, which is also due to the fact that it is a chance for the president not only to present the achievement made by his government, but also set a good image and gain continuous support for his administration in the coming days. The news conference consists of Obama's opening speech and questions from the reporters. This paper uses Obama's opening speech as the sample text and tries to make an analysis on how interpersonal meaning is fulfilled.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Functional Grammar grew out of the work of J.F. Firth and was mainly developed by M.A.K. Halliday. It is a theory of language centered on the notion of function. Halliday (2000) proposed that language has three meta-functions, the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. The interpersonal function plays the role of setting up and maintaining social relations, and indicates the roles of the participants in communication (Halliday, 2002). We use language to interact with people for some purposes: we may want to influence their attitudes or behavior, or to provide information that they do not know, or to explain our own attitudes or behavior, or to get them to take some actions, and so on (Thompson 2000, Simon, 1997). Halliday (2009) pointed out that the interpersonal meaning can be expressed by mood, modality and key. Later, he added pronoun system, attitudinal modifier and rhythmic features of words. Eggins (2004) found that the link between language systems and the choice made by the speaker in the exchange enable us to see speakers making meaning about interpersonal: the extent of their intimacy, their level of familiarity with each other and their attitudes and judgments. In a speech, to accomplish the interaction with the audience is the initial purpose of every speaker. So this paper explores how the speaker fulfills interpersonal meaning during the interaction in terms of mood, modal auxiliary, personal pronouns and tense shift.

## III. ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL MEANING

The investigation on the fulfillment of interpersonal meaning of public speech is conducted from the following four perspectives.

### A. Analysis of Mood

When we interact with people, we use language clearly to convey the unlimited purposes: we may want to order, apologize, confirm, invite, reject, describe and so on. According to Halliday, most of the fundamental purposes in any

exchange are giving (and taking) or demanding (and being given) a commodity of some kind (Halliday, 2000). Halliday (2000) classified two kinds of commodity, which he termed as “information” and “goods-service” and then four speech roles can be identified in Table 1.

TABLE 1:  
BASIC SPEECH ROLES.

role \ commodity	goods-service	information
giving	offer	statement
demanding	command	question

(Halliday, 2000)

Generally speaking, statements are most naturally expressed by declarative clauses, questions by interrogative clauses and commands by imperative. There also exist exceptions in certain context. For example, some interrogative sentences can also be used to give command with different intonation. In Functional Grammar, the subject and finite make up the mood and the subject-finite positioning in a clause realizes different speech functions, which plays a vital role in carrying out the interpersonal meaning of the clause as exchange and serves a reflection of social role and identity (Egins & Slade, 1997).

In Obama’s speech, all of the clauses adopt declarative mood except sentence 1 and sentence 9 which are imperative clauses. There are some considerations why he chose to use declarative mood. First of all, he is the information-giver and he needs to state out his opinions explicitly and express his ideas clearly. As the speech was given on his 100<sup>th</sup> day, lots of people attached great attention to it. Obama took office in such a special time and “change” is the theme that Obama has been repeatedly emphasizing in his campaign speech, and “Yes, we can” has become a slogan of Obama. Obama made a promise of changing and creating a different and better world for American people when he became the president, so it is his time to tell people what kinds of changes have taken place and what kinds of achievements they have made to prove their capability. Secondly, from the declarative mood, the relation between Obama and the listeners is marked and his authority, status and administration are well established. Declarative sentences not only function as describing, explaining, confirming, but also as advising, suggesting and encouraging. As a president, he has the authority to make comments and analysis of current issues. His statements are believed to be convincing and confirming.

#### B. Analysis of Modal Auxiliary

Halliday (2000) views that through modality the speaker takes up a position and signals the status and validity of his own judgments. If the commodity being exchanged is information, the clauses are labeled as proposition and modality expressions are termed as modalization which refers to the validity of proposition in terms of probability and usuality. If the commodity is goods and service, modality expressions are defined as proposals and are termed as modulation which reflects how confident the speaker can be in the eventual success of the exchange in terms of obligation and inclination. There are a large number of ways to realize modality, including modal auxiliary, adverbs, intonation and mental-process verbs. This paper will focus on modal auxiliary and Table 2 presents the frequency of modal auxiliary used in Obama’s speech.

TABLE 2:  
THE FREQUENCY OF MODAL AUXILIARY

modal auxiliary	will	can	should	have to
modality	inclination/futurity	ability/possibility	obligation	obligation
frequency	18	4	4	2

From the above table, we can easily find that “will” is used most frequently. It is mainly employed to provide information about what will exactly happen in the future and refers to the intention of Obama’s administration based on the speaker’s belief and perception. The use of “will” by president Obama reveals his views towards the future and its effect is strengthened by the power and authority he possesses. He is actually describing a wonderful blueprint for American people and these are consistent with the promise he made before. With these descriptions, he is able to attract people’s attention and gain their support, which in turn urges American people to make efforts to achieve these goals together with his administration. “Can” is used in the last sentence to intensify the firm confidence that American people should have for the promising future. It is also used to express the expectation that American people should have for their government’s efforts. The use of “can” indicates the possibility and Obama also tries to inspire and elicit hope from the audience. “Should” is adopted 3 times. One refers to normal condition of credit flow which shows the necessity of putting credit market right on track. As “should” usually expresses imperative suggestion or command, the other two convey a confirming belief and have a relatively strong request. “Have to” is used to express obligation from the external factors. Obama uses “have to” when he is talking about H1N1 flu virus and the essential foundation for growth. With the consideration of objective situation and factors, Obama states his opinions in an objective and convincing way which also mitigates his power and shows his friendliness. From the above analysis, we can conclude

that Obama tends to give hope and anticipate the future using “will” rather than enforcing on his people, through which, a good relationship is well established.

### C. Analysis of Pronoun System

For the analysis of pronoun system, Table 3 illustrates the frequency of personal pronouns used in Obama’s speech.

TABLE 3:  
THE FREQUENCY OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS

personal pronouns	we	I	you	our	your
frequency	28	18	6	17	3

As we all know, personal pronouns have a variety of functions in political speech, which can be interpreted from the aspect of social and political roles. They can achieve different interactive effects and reflect the speaker’s perception of the relationship between the listener and himself. From Table 3, we can notice that “we” is the most frequently used personal pronoun, together with its possessive form “our”. “We” can be used to refer to the group excluding the listener or the group including the listener. For example, “we” in sentence 3, 6, 8, 10, refers to Obama and his administration. Obama uses “we” to emphasize the willingness and the representative role of his administration as well as highlight the obligation and duty of the government. The authority and status are also established. While “we” in sentence 16, 17, 26, 27, refers to all the present people and all of the American people including Obama and his administration. Obama adopts “we” to identify that his government and himself are a part of the whole nation and all the achievements that have been made should be attributed to the efforts of all the American people and the challenge before them calls for their united hard work. Meanwhile, the combination of the possessive pronoun “our” with “we” together with the different reference of “we” integrates Obama’s administration with the American people, which can have a strong impact on the listeners and the whole nation. It creates such an impression: the government will fulfill its obligation with the joint efforts from all the American people in order to create the greatest benefit for the whole nation. The frequency of “I” is 18 times, but it mainly falls into the following categories in this speech: to express gratitude to certain people, to describe the specific deeds and words of Obama himself and to present his personal beliefs and comments. For example, “I” in sentence 21 mentions the promise Obama made during his campaign. By pointing out the specific promise with the comparison of the achievement, it implies that Obama has accomplished what he promised rather than making a promise, so American people can have full confidence in him. “You” is used only 6 times. In some sense, “you” can attract people’s attention by involving them in the interaction. In this speech, “you” extends from the listeners to the whole nation. While compared with “we”, it is less used. We can infer that, on the whole, by using “we” and “our” instead of “you” and “your”, the president tends to integrate his administration with the whole nation, which helps to shorten the distance between the people and him and create intimacy among them.

### D. Analysis of Tense Shift

Halliday (2000) contends that the basic function of the finite is to indicate the validity of the proposition. This can be done in two ways. One is by reference of modality, implying the judgment and attitude of the speaker. The other one is by reference to the time of speaking, which is termed as tense. By relating it to the here and now reality of the speech event, the tense makes it possible to negotiate about the validity of the proposition. Halliday (2000) summarized 3 primary tenses: past, present, future. Present tense dominates in Obama’s speech. We will focus on tense shift to discover how interpersonal meaning is realized through the interaction. Table 4 demonstrates tense shift in this speech.

TABLE 4:  
TENSE SHIFT

major tenses	present	future	present	past	present	future
sentence	1-7	8, 10	11-13	14-16	17-36	37-44

From the very beginning, Obama points out that he will give some latest news. From sentence 1 to sentence 7, present tense is mainly used to describe the present situation and the action taken by the government to combat the challenge. Then in sentence 8 and 10, future tense is employed and it enables the listeners to infer that in the future the government will make efforts to ensure what they have promised and they will continuously improve it. These help to relieve the people’s worry and reveal the consideration of the government on the American people. The use of present tense in sentence 11, 12 and 13 make the statement easy and available for the listeners to feel and recognize. Sentence 11 and 12 demonstrate Obama’s gratitude towards the House and the Senate’s approval of budget resolution. Sentence 13 illustrates the relation between the progress made during the past 100 days and the coming results the budget will bring about. Then the following 3 sentences using past tense make people look back and recall the policy and plan that have brought benefits to them. As the three main actions, including recovery acts, health insurance and housing plan, have made contribution to the recovery of the economy, the retrospection can attract people’s attention and create a good image for Obama’s administration. The following sentences, from 18 to 36 mainly using present tense, clearly present the challenge and difficulty. By association with the success, Obama tries to alert people and raise their awareness to continue to make efforts to change the current situation under his leadership. Finally future tense is mainly

adopted in sentences 37 to 44, describing the work to be done and the promising tomorrow the Americans will face, which ultimately touches the heart of every American. In the end, Obama manages to achieve a resonance with the audience and his purpose of speech is fulfilled.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper uses Obama's speech as an example to demonstrate how interpersonal meaning is generally realized in a political speech. From the above discussion, we can conclude that different uses of mood, modal auxiliary, personal pronouns and tense can express different levels of interpersonal meaning, thus endowing the speaker different status and different purpose, and the influence on the audience is also different. From the above analysis, we can conclude that by using declarative mood, Obama takes the role of information processor and deliverer, which serves the purpose of the news conference; by using different modal auxiliary, Obama presents his opinions and attitudes on issues, which can influence the attitude and belief of the listeners and the American people; by using different personal pronouns, especially the frequent use of "we", Obama establishes an intimate relationship with the people, which enables him to gain support from them.; by using different tenses, Obama is able to alert people the current situation, recall the good past 100 days, and present his confidence in the future, through which the speaker exploits the language to the utmost to achieve the interpersonal meaning during the interaction.

However, we should bear in our mind that other devices can also be used, such as adverbs, adjectives and intonation. If these are discussed in future study, we can have a more fruitful results.

#### APPENDIX TRANSCRIPTION OF OBAMA'S SPEECH

##### **President Obama:**

(1)Please, be seated. (2)Before we begin tonight, I just want to provide everyone with a few brief updates on some of the challenges we're dealing with right now.

(3)First, we are continuing to closely monitor the emergency cases of the H1N1 flu virus throughout the United States. (4)As I said this morning, this is obviously a very serious situation, and every American should know that their entire government is taking the utmost precautions and preparations.

(5)Our public health officials have recommended that schools with confirmed or suspected cases of this flu strongly consider temporarily closing. (6)And if more schools are forced to close, we've recommended that both parents and businesses think about contingency plans if their children do have to stay home.

(7)I've requested an immediate \$1.5 billion in emergency funding from Congress to support our ability to monitor and track this virus and to build our supply of antiviral drugs and other equipment. (8)And we will also ensure that those materials get to where they need to be as quickly as possible. (9)You would take to prevent any other flu: keep your hands washed; cover your mouth when you cough; stay home from work if you're sick; and keep your children home from school if they're sick.

(10)We'll continue to provide regular updates to the American people as we receive more information, and everyone should rest assured that this government is prepared to do whatever it takes to control the impact of this virus.

(11)The second thing I'd like to mention is how gratified I am that the House and the Senate passed a budget resolution today that will serve as an economic blueprint for this nation's future.

(12)I especially want to thank Leader Reid, Speaker Pelosi, all of the members of Congress who worked so quickly and effectively to make this blueprint a reality.

(13)This budget builds on the steps we've taken over the last 100 days to move this economy from recession to recovery and ultimately to prosperity.

(14)We began by passing a recovery act that has already saved or created over 150,000 jobs and provided a tax cut to 95 percent of all working families. (15)We passed a law to provide and protect health insurance for 11 million American children whose parents work full time. (16)And we launched a housing plan that has already contributed to a spike in the number of homeowners who are refinancing their mortgages, which is the equivalent of another tax cut.

(17)But, even as we clear away the wreckage of this recession, I've also said that we can't go back to an economy that's built on a pile of sand, on inflated home prices and maxed-out credit cards, on overleveraged banks and outdated regulations that allow recklessness of a few to threaten the prosperity of all.

(18)We have to lay a new foundation for growth, a foundation that will strengthen our economy and help us compete in the 21st century. (19)And that's exactly what this budget begins to do.

(20)It contains new investments in education that will equip our workers with the right skills and training, new investments in renewable energy that will create millions of jobs and new industries, new investments in health care that will cut costs for families and businesses, and new savings that will bring down our deficit.

(21)I also campaigned on the promise that I would change the direction of our nation's foreign policy. (22)And we've begun to do that, as well. (23)We've begun to end the war in Iraq, and we forged with our NATO allies a new strategy to target Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

(24)We have rejected the false choice between our security and our ideals by closing the detention center at Guantanamo Bay and banning torture without exception.

(25)And we've renewed our diplomatic efforts to deal with challenges ranging from the global economic crisis to the spread of nuclear weapons.

(26)So I think we're off to a good start, but it's just a start. (27) I'm proud of what we've achieved, but I'm not content. (28)I'm pleased with our progress, but I'm not satisfied.

(29)Millions of Americans are still without jobs and homes, and more will be lost before this recession is over. (30)Credit is still not flowing nearly as freely as it should. (31)Countless families and communities touched by our auto industry still face tough times ahead. (32)Our projected long-term deficits are still too high, and government is still not as efficient as it needs to be.

(33)We still confront threats ranging from terrorism to nuclear proliferation, as well as pandemic flu. (34)And all this means you can expect an unrelenting, unyielding effort from this administration to strengthen our prosperity and our security in the second hundred days, in the third hundred days, and all of the days after that.

(35)You can expect us to work on health care reform that will bring down costs while maintaining quality, as well as energy legislation that will spark a clean-energy revolution. (36)I expect to sign legislation by the end of this year that sets new rules of the road for Wall Street, rules that reward drive and innovation, as opposed to short-cuts and abuse.

(37)And we will also work to pass legislation that protects credit card users from unfair rate hikes and abusive fees and penalties. (38)We'll continue scouring the federal budget for savings and target more programs for elimination. (39)And we will continue to pursue procurement reform that will greatly reduce the no-bid contracts that have wasted so many taxpayer dollars.

(40)So we have a lot of work left to do. (41)It's work that will take time, and it will take effort. (42)But the United States of America, I believe, will see a better day.

(43)We will rebuild a stronger nation, and we will endure as a beacon for all of those weary travelers beyond our shores who still dream that there's a place where all of this is possible.

(44)I want to thank the American people for their support and their patience during these trying times, and I look forward to working with you in the next hundred days, in the hundred days after that, all of the hundreds of days to follow to make sure that this country is what it can be.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Halliday, M.A.K. (2000). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [2] Halliday, M. A. K. (2002). *On grammar* (edited by Jonathan J. Webster). London: Continuum.
- [3] Thompson, G. (2000). *Introducing functional grammar*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [4] Simon, D. (1997). *The theory of functional grammar-complex and derived constructions*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [5] Halliday, M. A. K. (2009). *The essential Halliday*. In J.J. Webster (edited). London: Continuum.
- [6] Eggins, S. (2004). *An introduction to systemic functional linguistics*. London: Continuum.
- [7] Eggins, S. & D. Slade. (1997). *Analyzing casual conversation*. London: Cassell.
- [8] Transcription source: <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/29/obama.transcript/index.html>.

**Hao Feng** was born in Yiyang, China in 1986. She received her B.A degree in English from Hunan Agricultural University, China in 2008. She is currently a graduate student in College of Foreign Languages, Beijing University of Technology, Beijing, China. Her main interests include conversation analysis and language teaching.

**Yuhui Liu** is a professor in College of Foreign Languages, Beijing University of Technology, Beijing, China and has published more than 30 academic papers on English teaching & learning and on conversation analysis, and more than 20 textbooks and workbooks on vocabulary, listening, reading and writing as the first author or chief editor; she has been in charge of more than 10 academic research projects about teaching methodology, teaching reform, and conversational analysis & teaching of listening and speaking.