

# A Critical Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump's Inaugural Speech from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar

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**Abstract**—As an interdiscipline that studies the relation of language, power and ideology, critical discourse analysis has attracted more and more linguists' attention, which can be applied to analyze language features under certain social and cultural background. Critical discourse analysis is based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar that is a practical method to analyze discourse. Political discourse as a kind of typical discourse which involves the speaker's ideology and intention, can also be analyzed by critical discourse analysis. Therefore, this paper analyzes Donald Trump's inaugural speech mainly from the perspectives of transitivity, modality, personal pronoun and coherence in order to reveal the speaker's political intention, and help readers understand the meaning of discourse, cultivate their critical consciousness and analytical ability. The paper concludes that Trump uses different language forms to transmit, change and maintain audiences' ideology subtly. At the same time, it has a positive effect on the development of the critical discourse analysis.

**Index Terms**—critical discourse analysis, political speech, Donald Trump's speech, systemic functional grammar, ideology

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Background of the Study

Critical discourse analysis became a newly developing branch in the study of modern linguistics at the end of the 1970s. It is an interdisciplinary language study that explains social problems, which involves many fields, such as sociology, politics, communication and pedagogy. Critical linguistics regards language as a social practice. Language and social institution are inseparable. Language not only reflects society, but also participates in the construction of social objects and social relations.

Critical discourse analysis explains discourses from the perspective of social institution and constitution. It highlights that society influences discourse. Meanwhile, it pays close attention to discourse's reaction on society. Since the birth of critical discourse analysis, political field has been of paramount importance. Critical discourse analysis reveals power and ideology implied in political discourses. It explains how belief and sense of worth are expressed via language.

Critical discourse analysis as an analytical method is based on various theories, particularly on Halliday's systemic functional grammar. Halliday proposed three meta-functions after he inherited and developed different schools' thoughts. He emphasizes the relation between language and society. Systemic functional grammar is a practical theory that has been applied in discourse analysis. Many linguists and scholars adopt this theory to analyze different discourses.

A study of political speech in the framework of Halliday's systemic functional grammar from the angle of its three meta-functions will be valuable and significant.

### B. Purpose of the Study

Critical discourse analysis as an instrument can analyze discourse thoroughly. It studies the interaction between language and society and reflects power, superiority, inequality and prejudice. Political speech is the production of statesman with power and authority, which plays an important role in realization of speakers' political intention. The aim of analyzing political discourse is to reveal how the speaker persuades audiences to accept his opinions and support him. So the deep meaning of political speech that involves in speaker's opinion, stance and ideology can be perceived.

### C. Significance of the Study

Critical discourse analysis as an analytical method provides a reference and guidance for many researches, especially political discourse analysis. Speaker's ideology can be revealed through analyzing the language characteristics. Critical discourse analysis can raise language user's consciousness, help people understand the deep meaning of political speech and improve their sensitiveness to the language. It is also beneficial for language learners in terms of the reading and critical skills.

This study can enrich the research of American president's political speeches and have some implications to the political discourse analysis.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Previous Studies of Critical Discourse Analysis Abroad

Discourse Analysis was referred by American structuralism linguist Z. S. Harris in his article published on *Language* in 1952. Harris argues that discourse is an embodiment of members' activity. He explains syntactic rules and communication strategies in terms of semantics and context. The relation between discourse and social situation is mainly discussed in his article. J. R. Firth points that language has performative function. He focuses on the analysis of discourse's meaning in certain context.

Mitchell employs a semantic analysis approach to analyze the relationship between participants and environment. In the middle of the 1960s, the discourse analysis became an independent discipline. Fowler first put forward critical discourse analysis in *Language and Control* in 1979. He develops the basic principles of discourse analysis. Fowler argues that it is inappropriate to analyze discourse separately without considering historical, cultural and social factors. He emphasizes that language has ideological meaning and reflects social relations. Critical discourse analysis has critical and analytical functions.

Van Dijk pointed whether sentences or utterances embody discourse meaning in 1985. Text and discourse are two kinds of language organization forms. Text put emphasis on structure, while discourse focuses on social, historical and cultural conditions. He analyzes discourse from the aspects of vocabulary, modality and mood, which reveal writer's or speaker's idea and intention. Van Dijk employs this theory in the study of news, academic and political discourse. Stubbs claims that discourse analysis can be applied in analyzing discourses presented in written or verbal forms. Van Dijk's *Prejudice in Discourse* and Wodak's *Language, Power and Ideology* mark the formation of critical discourse analysis.

M. A. K. Halliday proposes functional approach in *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. This method emphasizes on language function and the thematic structure and information structure. This book not only describes language structure, but also reveals reasons from the angle of social function. Systemic functional grammar can be used as a concrete tool to analyze discourses. Halliday pointed the basic type of speech is giving and demanding. Information exchange happens between participants.

Fairclough studied political discourse's power and ideology in 1989. He proposed three-dimensional framework that is on the basis of systemic functional linguistics and social semiotics. Language text, discourse and sociocultural practice have close connection. He also thinks discourse is a social practice. Critical discourse analysis reflects that social structure determines discourse pattern and discourse influences social construction.

Kress pointed that critical discourse analysis interprets the internal structure and integral organization of discourse in 1990. Critical discourse analysis can analyze communal oral language, such as newspaper, political dialogue, advertisement and official language. Speaker's view, stance and value are expressed. Wodak argues that ideology can be constructed through discourse in 1989. The decoding and encoding of discourse are influenced by social and cultural context. Both of them agree that discourse reflects power and ideology and critical discourse analysis explains the relationship between discourse and society.

### B. Studies of Critical Discourse Analysis at Home

Chinese scholars began to study critical discourse analysis at the end of 1990s. *An Introduction and Evaluation to Critical Linguistics* was written by Chen Zhongzhu who introduced critical discourse analysis in 1995. He describes the critical discourse analysis as an analytical method and reviews its development. Then more and more domestic scholars start to study this theory.

Xin Bin is a prominent representative in this field. *Cognitive Discourse Analysis in Critical Discourse Analysis* was published in 2002. She explains the relations among language, power and ideology and emphasizes that discourse must be analyzed under certain social context. At the same time, Halliday's systemic functional grammar has been introduced in China, which provides a new framework for further research.

Chinese linguists wrote many books about discourse analysis. For example, Huang Guowen published *An Outline of Discourse Analysis* in 1988. Zhu Yongsheng wrote *Reflections on Systemic-functional Linguistics* in 2001. Hu Zhuanglin points that discourse can be analyzed from the perspective of language function and usage in *On the Cohesion and Coherence of Texts* in 1994. They study and corroborate theories and methods related to critical discourse analysis. Three meta-functions are more suitable for discourse analysis (Huang Guowen, 2001).

Ding Jianxin and Liao Yiqing claim the influence of ideology on discourse and discourse's reaction in 2002. They also explore the relation between language and ideology. Ding Jianxin finds that modal auxiliaries and imperative structures help speaker maintain his position, establish a harmonious interaction and realize his purpose.

Xiang Yunhua studies the relationship between language and power in political speech and emphasizes the significance of such relation in 2006. She reveals power and ideology concealed in discourse and how speaker use language to express his ideas.

The research of discourse analysis still tends to study theory and literature in China. The analysis of authentic materials is not enough. Many linguists have conducted a lot of research on political discourse from different views. This paper applies transitivity, modality and pronouns in analyzing political speech.

### C. *Political Speech and American Presidential Inaugural Speech*

Political discourse is a classic discourse, including speech, slogan, declaration and reply in press conference. Political speech is a social practice, which plays a significant role in realizing speakers' goals. The representative political discourse is American president's speech. Unlike normal discourse, political speech is a kind of discourse that takes the speaker's stand, clarify his view and declare his proposal. The most important feature of it is to achieve political aims. In order to get audiences' support and obtain their recognition, statemen always establish a close relation with them.

American president's inaugural speech shows president's attitude about internal issues and international events. Building a good image is necessary for winning trust. Presidents proclaim new policies and guidelines involving in many aspects, such as economic condition, political affairs, social security and diplomatic strategy. They show strong confidence and promise to take effective measures. It's important to persuade people to change their ideology. Therefore, it not only needs to meet speaker's demand, but also to consider audiences' feelings.

The topic of political speech closely relates to the real world. Power relation decides the discourse's structure. The formal degree of occasion, participants' position and distance, and the aim of speech should be taken into consideration. In order to interact with audiences and incite their passions, stateman uses language skillfully. The transformation of word and choice of sentence structure needs to be appropriate. Christianity is deep-rooted in Americans' minds, so Bible is often quoted in political speech. It can change people's ideology and behavior.

## III. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF HALLIDAY'S SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR

Critical discourse analysis studies discourse combined with context. It is based on many theories, especially on Halliday's systemic functional grammar. Halliday claims that language is a tool for human communication. He put forward three meta-functions: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function, which study language function from the aspect of semantics. Systemic functional grammar is an operable and practical method to analyze discourse.

### A. *Ideational Function*

Speaker or writer embodies his experience of the phenomenon of the real world through ideational function (Halliday, 1973). Language is used to describe the real world, including people's inside or outside experience, which constitutes different processes (Halliday, 2000). Transitivity can realize the function, because this system construes experience into a set of process types.

Transitivity system includes six processes: material, mental, behavioral, verbal, relational and existential process. Different verbs belong to different processes, which represent certain meaning. The choice of process reflects people's view about experiences and behaviors. Each process consists of participants, the process and circumstance related to the process.

Material processes are what has been done and what happens. Participants are actor and goal. Actor refers to entity, which can be human or object. Goal may be someone or something, to which pronoun or noun refers. This process uses action verb to express concrete and abstract behaviors. It is effective to describe the occurrence of events. Objectivity of political discourse can be strengthened, because doing can convince people further.

Mental processes refer to people's internal perception of the world. It includes sensor and phenomenon. Sensor is the minded, while phenomenon can be object, fact or thing. There are three sub-types: perception (seeing, looking, hearing, etc); affection (loving, liking, hating, etc) and cognition (understanding, knowing, thinking, etc). They have high degree subjectivity.

Relational processes are processes of being, which show two objects' relation. It can be used to describe an entity's feature. There are two modes: one is attributive relation. Subject is a carrier, and predicate is an attribution. It shows object's property and category. The other is identifying relation, which uses noun or adjective to modify an entity. Mental process mainly discusses potential cognition and sensing, while the process emphasizes an entity's property and identification.

Verbal process includes three participants: target receiver, verbiage and receiver. Exchanging information and expressing meaning can be realized through saying. Behavioral processes involve physiological and psychological behavior, such as breathing, smiling and dreaming (Halliday, 2000). Unlike material process, this process only has one participant: behavior.

Existential processes refer that something exists. The existent is the participant.

### B. *Interpersonal Function*

Interpersonal function is that can build and maintain social relation. It shows people's identity and position, which reflects authority and domination. This function is realized by modality, personal pronouns and mood. It can be used to express one's will, faith and determination.

Modality is an important component of interpersonal function. It can reveal people's cognition and attitude. According to Halliday's modal operators, modality can be divided into three levels: low modal verb (can, may, could, might); middle modal verb (will, would, should); high modal verb (must, ought, need). These are positive modal verbs. The higher value of modal verb is, the more affirmative of discourse is. Modality can also be classified into three basic

values, which show the degree of probability, usuality, obligation and inclination. There is no better analytical method to analyze discourse than modality.

Personal pronouns can show participants' position, power and role in the communication. The choice of personal pronoun determines the relationship between speaker and listener. "We" is the first- person plural pronoun, including inclusive and exclusive pronouns. The former can create a more equal and harmonious atmosphere than exclusive personal pronoun. The second person pronoun "you" can achieve interactive function. The third person pronoun means potential roles of hearers.

Mood contains the subject and the finite. It can be categorized into two types: indicative and imperative. And indicative includes declarative and interrogative. It embodies people's confidence and determination. Active voice shows duty and present tense means truth.

### C. *Textual Function*

Textual function refers to the fact that information is organized in an unified and coherent way. Theme structure, information structure and cohesion system are three components of textual function. This paper mainly discusses the thematic structure and cohesion system.

Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned. Rheme is the message's remainder developed from the theme (Halliday, 2000:37). In general, theme is given information and rheme is new information. Halliday classifies the theme into three categories: simple theme, multiple theme and clausal theme according to the sentence's complexity. The simple theme is a single structure element, such as nominal, adverbial and prepositional phrase. Multiple theme includes topical theme, textual theme, interpersonal theme and experiential theme. Clausal theme is a clause that comes first in the clause complex.

Theme can also be classified into marked and unmarked theme. Marked theme is used frequently. Important information is always placed at the beginning of a sentence, because the subject shows people's attitude. New message is located in the rest of the sentence. If there are some reasons, the object will be put in the subject position. When the theme is different from the subject, the theme is marked. Adverbial group and prepositional phrase are two main forms of marked theme.

Cohesion system is another component of textual function. Coherence can be realized by cohesive devices. Repetition belongs to lexical cohesion, which can enhance mood. Logical cohesion is achieved by causal conjunction, and structural cohesion depends on substitution.

## IV. THE ANALYSIS OF TRUMP'S INAUGURAL SPEECH

Donald Trump took the oath of office in Washington in America on January 20<sup>th</sup> in 2017. American president's speech is of great importance in the world, so it is meaningful and valuable to analyze this political speech critically. The main purpose of Trump's inaugural speech is to achieve political goals. In order to gain support and make people accept his new policy, Trump uses language skillfully.

Halliday's systemic functional grammar can be used as a theoretical framework to study political speech. This paper analyzes the speech from the aspects of transitivity, modality, personal pronouns and coherence. Trump's ideology can be reflected from his language characteristics.

### A. *Transitivity*

Transitivity is a remarkable sign of ideational function, which shows people's view, attitude and stance. The choice of process can reflect speaker's intention. Material processes and relational processes are used more frequent in Donald Trump's speech.

#### 1. **Material Process**

Material processes appear eighty one times in Trump's speech, which is used to inform audiences some message. This process is suitable for him to describe American achievements and moves. It can incite audiences' patriotic passions and encourage them to create a glorious future. If the doing processes are used rightly, Americans will trust the government and accept the new policy.

"Because today we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another-but we are transferring power from Washington DC and giving it back to you, the people."

Trump claims that the government takes the side of Americans and power belongs to the people. The ruling party and potentate are concerned with people's interests. "Transferring" and "giving" show that the officers use formal authority on behalf of the public. They can stir audiences' enthusiasm and motivate a sense of pride. So Trump can enlist the support of audiences.

"For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost."

Unlike American previous presidents, Trump, as a wealthy businessman, says facts according to his cognition, without considering political inclination. He emphasizes that society exists a large number of poor people who suffers hardship. They work hard but gain few benefits. Trump uses "borne" to show that he awares of the public's difficult circumstances. This process make audiences know the new president devotes himself to changing social inequality and

injustice.

"For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military;"

"We" indicates Trump is one member of the public, which shortens the distance between audiences and him. He states the situation of economic industry, military power, border trade and so on. He criticizes domestic guidelines and diplomatic policies enacted in the past few years, because they cause failures. Using material verbs can express Trump's dissatisfaction. He intends to revive economy and construct infrastructure, which make people know his strong resolution.

"And now we are looking only to the future." "From this day forward, it is going to be only America first, America first."

Trump appeals people to head for the future. Hope and confidence can arouse audiences' resonance. He puts people's interests in the first place, which can encourage morale and cohere a united whole. Trump builds himself as an image who can restore America. People are persuaded to believe they can make great progress under the correct guidance.

"We assembled here today are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power."

"Assemble" as a material verb, indicates the importance of solidarity. "Issuing" shows that the ruling party would enact sound policies and have resolution to boost every trade's development. It is in favor of him to acquire advocacy.

## **2. Relational process**

"This is your day. This is your celebration. And this, the United States of America, is your country."

Relational process is permanent, objective and authoritative. New times is coming. Trump encourages everyone to rise to the occasion and struggle for better life. Trump claims that all Americans are masters of their nation and play a very important role in the world. America needs everyone's contribution, so each citizen has the responsibility to protect and construct his country. Only if all of people work together, the nation will become powerful and prosperous. Trump promises they can enjoy achievements, which encourage Americans to work hard and dedicate themselves to the country.

"At the center of this moment is a crucial conviction."

Faith is necessary and significant for human. This sentence shows Americans must keep determined belief and march forward. It is faith that can inspire them to join their cause.

"We are one nation – and their pain is our pain. Their dreams are our dreams; and their success will be our success. The oath of office I take today is an oath of allegiance to all Americans."

The relationship between America and its citizens is clear through this process. Trump proclaims that they are an united whole. Whether good or ill, they need bound together, and share happiness and bitterness with each other. Union is strength. He appeals people concentrate all strengths on country's development. The accession of his identity shows the loyalty and willing to serve America forever. Trump can win audiences' trust and support.

## **3. Existential process**

"When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice."

There are many black Americans who are discriminated by the white. And they are treated unfairly in daily life. In order to obtain more supporters, Trump argues the current condition needs to be changed and social justice can be realized. Audiences will accept new political principles conformably.

## **4. Verbal process**

"The Bible tells us: 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.'"

Bible is often cited in political speeches. Religious faith is entrenched in Americans' hearts. Trump proposes policy by means of a divine power, which reinforces audiences' belief. So people believe union can make them more powerful.

## **B. Modality**

Modality can be used to express people's desire, which reflects their faith and inclination. It appears frequently in political speech. High modality shows people's firm attitude and stance, while middle modality indicates mitigatory mood.

Trump uses a great deal of modality to express his view and feeling. For instance, "will" appears forty one times, but "must" occurs three times. He is inclined to use middle modality that can forecast the future and show the resolution. He builds great confidence in order to excite audiences' passions. Meanwhile, he persuades audiences to accept his idea and attitude, which change their ideologies invisibly.

"I will fight for you with every breath in my body-and I will never, ever let you down."

Trump makes serious promise that he devotes himself to America. "Will" means the hope that he can live up to people's expectations. The middle modality keeps the content neutrality and avoid controversy or argument. Trump's opinions can be accepted by audiences easily.

"We will not fail. Our country will thrive and prosper again."

"Will" can weaken subjectivity, which leaves more spaces for audiences to make right decisions. Audiences make judgment and believe that America will flourish.

"We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs."

This modality shows Trump's charisma and authority. It is everyone's obligation to guard territory, defend rights and have work. Using "must" incites audiences' will and strengthens their courage.

Personal pronouns are another way to express interpersonal meaning. The relationship between speaker and audiences can be eased by choosing different personals. More than forty sentences contain the first personal pronoun, which creates a peaceful and united atmosphere. "We" and "our" appear ninety six times in Trump's speech, because he wants to shorten the distance with audiences. He emphasizes they have common aim, interest and stance. Audiences' ideology is changed and controlled by Trump.

"We will follow two simple rules: buy American and hire American."

Trump transmits his idea, attitude, view and standpoint through using the first personal pronoun. It is "we" that makes everything natural and acceptable. The first plural personal pronoun caters for audiences' psychology. Therefore, their ideologies are assimilated and maintained.

Trump wants to evade the negative report of his arrogance. So he uses "they" to call Washington elites who disregard ordinary Americans' sufferings. The aim is to draw a clear distinction with them and take his stand. It shows that Trump has excellent persuasive skills.

### C. *Coherence*

Critical discourse analysis also focuses on discourse's structure and content. The most apparent feature of Trump's speech is parallelism, which makes the content compactness. Audiences can feel language's mighty and grandiose.

"Together, we will make America strong again. We will make America wealthy again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again. And, yes, together, we will make America great again."

Trump discusses hot topics related to people's life, such as employment, border, facility and welfare issues. Upon these problems, he states his ideas clearly. The parallel form can strengthen the credibility of speech and arouse audiences' sentiments. It builds American's confidence and encourages them to make America great again. The repetition highlights that their life can be improved. "Together" demands audiences to participate in restoring America. Solidarity and cooperation can achieve their dreams. Trump hopes people can inherit ancestors' good traditions and make great achievements.

Although these parallel constructions seem convincing, they lack concrete and material contents. Trump uses his superiority to brainwash Americans. He intends to bound him to American revival and realize his political aims.

"The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer."

Passive voice highlights the leading role of men and women. Trump gives them high expectations. They are encouraged to work hard and make great efforts.

"Now arrives the hour of action."

This is a marked theme, because "now" is put at the starting point. It can attract audiences' attention. Trump is a businessman who knows the urgency of time. He stresses the significance of action, and appeals people to take act at once. For instance, "empty is over" shows act is vital in entrepreneurial spirit. Audiences aware that it is high time to build up establishments.

## V. CONCLUSION

### A. *Findings*

The author did the study of critical discourse analysis of Trump's inaugural speech by using Halliday's systemic functional grammar. Language is analyzed from the angles of transitivity, modality, personal pronouns and coherence. Language form can reflect people's view, attitude and stance, which reveals his intention. The speech influences people's minds and change their ideologies.

Trump chooses material processes and relational processes to show the resolution that he can change the current situation. In order to establish close relations with audiences, he uses first personal pronouns and high modality. Trump uses simple words, brief sentences and declarative mood which is understandable for everyone. It is favourable to achieve Trump's political goals.

### B. *Limitation*

The time that the author analyzes the political speech is limited. The inadequacy of pragmatic knowledge may affect preciseness of the study. It is necessary to explore the complex relation among language, power and ideology further. Political discourse is only a kind of discourse, which needs high sensibility.

### C. *Suggestion and Implication*

Critical discourse analysis is enlightening to analyze political discourse. It proves that Halliday's three meta-functions are valuable. There are other analytical methods, such as the socio-cognitive approach of Van Dijk, Wodak's discourse-historical method, Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, and Thompso and Bhatia's genre analysis. Future research on discourse analysis should consider the socio-historical and socio-cultural context. The improvement of analyzing ability can make people understand discourse well.

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