

Introduction to Discourse Analysis – Assignment 1

1 Introduction

Political speeches are more than their content, they are tools used to influence listeners and/or diminish the opposition. A successful speech will bridge the gap between the speaker and the audience, making listeners identify with the message, believe and support the politician. To analyse speeches from this perspective, one can turn to Interpersonal Metafunction, one of the functions of language proposed by Halliday (1970b) as part of his functional view of language. Ye (2010) and Nur (2015) analyse Interpersonal Metafunction in Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential election victory speech and in Nelson Mandela’s 1994 inauguration speech, respectively. Having analysed the same elements of the metafunction, their conclusions regarding the use and role of the metafunction elements in the two speeches are comparable. The conclusions are also practically the same. I challenge this agreement and hypothesise that victory and inauguration speeches differ in ways that should surface in Interpersonal Metafunction. While victory speeches address supporters of the elect and will likely reflect on the successful campaign and celebrate, inauguration speeches present the program of the upcoming presidency and are aimed at the entire nation, thus needing to unite all citizens and make them believe and support the set common goals. To verify my hypothesis, I analyse a speech that shares the time period and speaker with that analysed by Ye: the 2009 inauguration speech of Barack Obama. Thus, and by analysing the same elements of Interpersonal Metafunction as Ye, I keep most variables fixed while varying the occasion, audience and aims of the speech in question. Then, in section TODO I elaborate on the findings of Ye and Nur and juxtapose them with mine.

2 Theoretical background

In his works in Systemic Functional Linguistics, Michael Halliday views language as shaped by the functions it serves, as inherently functionally organised. The different functions are thus directly related to the different kinds of meaning language carries. The language functions (or metafunctions) Halliday (1970b) proposes, together with the corresponding *strands of meaning*, are:

1. **experiential metafunction** – as an “observer’s” tool for describing reality, experi-

ence, ideas; leading to **ideational meaning**,

2. **interpersonal metafunction** – as an “actor’s” tool for taking a stance or role, interacting with and influencing others; creating the **interpersonal meaning**,
3. **textual metafunction** – as a “communicator’s” tool for making the previous two meanings surface in a coherent way, considerate of the wider social and situational context as well as the local context of surrounding text; leading to **textual meaning**.

The different functions co-exist in language and are intertwined, but the interpersonal metafunction is what makes language a social instrument like in political speeches. A speaker can use elements of the metafunction to assume a role, change the *social distance* between them and the audience, establish positive or close relationships, unite or divide, inspire and persuade.

3 Data

Barack Obama’s inauguration speech took place in January 2009, 2.5 months after his victory speech (analysed by [Ye](#)). The world was amidst the global financial crisis, the US were involved in a war in Iraq, and the idea of an environmental crisis was becoming clearer. Obama names all these directly and, by recalling the difficulties past generations of Americans faced throughout history with perseverance and high spirit, tries to motivate the audience to unite and fight again. The speech was addressed to all Americans and even to other nations, and it tried to win the audience for the program of the upcoming presidency. Hence, compared to the victory speech, Obama focuses much more on uniting all citizens (not just his supporters) and recalls common American values grounded in history to motivate his proposed actions. Importantly, the speaker stays the same person with the same affiliation. Hence, I hypothesise that any observed differences are related mainly to the different situations.

4 Analysis

For better comparability with [Nur](#) and [Ye](#), I analyse the same elements of Interpersonal Metafunction: mood, modality and personal pronouns.

4.1 Mood

At the interpersonal level, language interaction can be viewed as speaker-initiated exchange of a commodity: The speaker can either give or demand, and the commodity is either information or goods/services. The system of mood is then “the expression of the speaker’s choice of role in the communicative situation” (Halliday, 1970a), where choosing to give/demand information leads to statements/questions, and giving/demanding goods-and-services leads to offer/command. Note that while choosing (confrontational) commands can easily *increase* the speaker-audience social distance, statements or offers can have the opposite effect. Thus, to bridge the gap, politicians often choose statements to get closer to the audience.

| | DECLARATIVE | IMPERATIVE | INTERROGATIVE |
|------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| HERE | 92% | 8% | 0% |
| YE | 94% | 5% | 1% |
| NUR | 88% | 12% | 0% |

Table 1: Percentage of types of main clauses (numbers from Ye and Nur for reference).

Grammatically, statements are realised as declarative clauses, questions as interrogatives, and commands as imperatives. Table 1 shows that Obama uses almost exclusively declaratives. Their effective use helps him to communicate important values that unite all Americans:

On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord. (1)

but also to then persuade and motivate:

Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. (2)

Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America. (3)

while still sounding relatable as opposed to confrontational or patronising.

The 9 imperative clauses serve two roles. They show strength and courage when confrontationally addressing others not compliant with the values:

To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society’s ills on the West, know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy. (4)

In the other case, when addressing Americans, *all* imperatives are used not in the usual way (to command someone), but instead using “let” to invite listeners to join in and act together.

*With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure
what storms may come.* (5)

Altogether, both declaratives and imperatives help convey key messages (whether values or the new government’s program) in a positive way, showing Obama as a strong leader who invites everyone to join him.

4.2 Modality

References

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