Introduction to Discourse Analysis – Assignment 1

1   Introduction

Political speeches go beyond content, they are tools used to influence listeners. Successful speeches bridge the speaker-audience gap, make listeners identify with and support the politician. To analyse speeches from this perspective, one can turn to Interpersonal Metafunction, a function of language proposed by Halliday (1970b). 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. Their findings regarding the use and role of the metafunction elements are 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 typically address supporters, celebrate and reflect on campaigns, inauguration speeches present priorities of upcoming presidencies and aim at entire nation, trying to unite all citizens behind the proposed goals. To verify my hypothesis, I analyse the 2009 inauguration speech of Barack Obama, which shares the time period and speaker with that analysed by Ye. 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 speech. After the analysis, I juxtapose my findings with those of Ye and Nur.

2   Theoretical background

In Systemic Functional Linguistics, Halliday views language as shaped by functions it serves – functionally organised. The different functions then relate to different kinds of meaning language carries. The (meta)functions Halliday (1970b) proposes, with corresponding meaning types, are:

1. **experiential metafunction** – as an "observer's" tool for describing reality, experience, 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 **interpersonal meaning**,

3. **textual metafunction** – as a "communicator's" tool for making the previous two meanings surface coherently, considerate of wider social and situational context and of local context of surrounding text; leading to **textual meaning**.

The different functions co-exist in language, but the interpersonal metafunction is what makes language a social instrument like in political speeches. Speakers use elements of the metafunction to assume role, change the social distance between them and audiences, establish relationships, unite or divide, inspire and persuade.

3   Data

Obama's inauguration speech took place in January 2009 (2.5 months after the victory speech). America was facing the global financial crisis and war in Iraq, and an approaching environmental crisis was becoming clearer. Obama names these directly and, by recalling the difficulties past generations of Americans faced with perseverance and high spirit (i.e. common American values grounded in history), motivates citizens to unite and fight again. Addressed to all Americans and to other nations, the speech tried to win support for the upcoming presidency's challenging goals. The speaker stays the same person with the same affiliation as in the victory speech. Hence, I hypothesise that any observed differences relate mainly to the different situations.

4   Analysis

For 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: He assumes the role of the information giver. Thus, he can effectively 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 cases – when addressing Americans – all imperatives are used not in the usual way (to command), but instead using "let", emotionally inviting 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 all citizens to join him.

4.2 Modality

Modality refers to intermediate polarities from the continuum bounded by "yes" and "no". The system enables:

- speakers to assume a position towards a proposition in terms of its probability and usuality (termed *modalization*)

- describing varying levels of obligation and inclination (termed *modulation*)

While modulation happens at the content (ideational) level and modalization at the interpersonal level where the speaker expresses their stance, in English, they both surface primarily as uses of modal verbal operators ("can", "must", "may", ...); thus, Halliday (1970a) speaks of "the same system in different functions", where modalization is still *oriented towards* the ideational component and modulation is "ideational material ... oriented towards the interpersonal".

	will (future/wish)	would	must	can/cannot	could	be able to	other	total
here	35% (24%/11%)	2%	15%	22%/11%	0%	0%	15%	54
Ye	33% (13%/20%)	?	7%	40%	?	?	20%	55
Nur	40% (?/?)	?	20%	7%	7%	7%	20%	15

Table 2: Distribution of modal verb operators (numbers from Ye and Nur for reference).

Table 2 shows that the strongest modals (will, must) dominate Obama's inauguration speech. However, upon looking carefully, only 1/3 of all uses of "will" express determination or strong wish:

$$\text{All this we can do.} \qquad (6)$$
$$\text{And all this we will do.}$$

All this we can do.
And all this we will do. (6)

while the rest use "will" merely as a marker of future tense:

Where the answer is no, programs will end. (7)

Similarly with "must": While in 6 cases it communicates the sense of urging necessity and obligation like in (3), in 2 cases it does not carry this energy:

[...] greatness is never a given.
It must be earned. (8)

Overall, these high commitment modals help Obama communicate determination and ur-

gency in an emotional way, but many uses of "will" are simply related to him presenting *future* actions in his program.

The frequent use of "can" – so dominant in the victory speech in the repeated phrase *yes we can*, making Americans believe in their abilities – must be here viewed again with a grain of salt. I find only 2 instances where "can" emotionally persuades audience about their abilities; see (6) and:

> *Guided by these principles once more, we can meet those new threats that demand even greater effort [...]* (9)

The remaining 16 instances instead refer to past generations or other nations (see (4)), or use "can" merely to communicate possibility:

> *For as much as government can do and must do [...]* (10)

4.3   Personal pronouns

By choosing different pronouns, speaker can establish different speaker-audience relations; e.g. "I" emphasises the *I vs you* gap, "we" can bridge this gap, and "they" emphasises the *we vs they* gap. Thus, the use of pronouns is an important tool for a politician.

	I	we (excl./incl.)	us	our	you	your	s/he	they/their/them/it	total
here	1%	27% (4%/23%)	10%	30%	6%	1%	0.5%	8%/4%/2%/8%	224
Ye	19%	31%	8%	17%	10%	3%	10%	2%/?/?/?	131
Nur	1%	34%	11%	26%	3%	0%	0%	1%/9%/3%/13%	80

Table 3: Distribution of personal pronouns (numbers from Ye and Nur for reference).

Table 3 shows that as much as 67% of all personal pronouns are 1st-person plural forms, used mainly to portray all Americans as united and Obama as one of them, see (1), (2), (3), (5), (6), (9). Only 1/6 of all uses of "we" employs the exclusive, dividing *we all vs they* sense – mainly when talking about enemies:

> *[...] for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken; you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you.* (11)

This directly confrontational tone is also the main way in which Obama uses 2nd-person pronouns (in 14/17 cases) – rather then opting for the more indirect confrontation using 3rd person. Only in 3 cases does he use "you" to address Americans: when using "I-you"

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to establish an intimate bond and express humbleness:

> *My fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed [...]* (12)

As for 3rd-person pronouns, Obama uses them to talk of those not present whom he doesn't want to confront in any way, rather to respect them: the past generations and the troops. Thus, he grounds his speech in these values widely shared by Americans:

> *For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sahn.* (13)

5   Comparing with Nur and Ye

Both Nur and Ye explore how Interpersonal Metafunction is used to make speeches succeed. I reason that victory and inauguration speeches have different aims and hence one should expect different uses of the metafunction for success. However, looking at the conclusions of Nur and Ye, I see no principal differences. Hence, I carry out a more detailed comparison and include results of my analysis. If I am to confirm generalizability of the results (and hence usefulness of Interpersonal Metafunction as a tool for analysing political speeches), I expect to find differences that are relatable to the different aims of the speeches.

Regarding mood, all 3 sets of findings are very similar: Declaratives hugely dominate, communicating ideas and values, uniting speakers with listeners and inspiring. The (non-commanding) infrequent imperatives follow, bringing passion and emotion, encouraging people to act together and confronting enemies.

Regarding modality, I argue that Table 2 uncovers conflicting points. It shows higher use of "must" in inauguration speeches, yet the conclusions in all three cases are practically identical: *that "must" shows determination and calls to action.* I also see that Ye's and my conclusions about the uses of "will" are very similar, yet the victory speech is dominated by "will" in the sense of strong determination while Obama's inauguration uses it mainly for describing future actions. The rest of the conclusions and statistics mostly agree well, even though the use of "can" in the victory speech is skewed by the 6x repeated *yes we can.* Altogether, even where conclusions are similar, by comparing the statistics I see that inauguration speeches use "must" and the future "will" more frequently, which I relate to the aim of proposing and motivating plans for the presidency.

In use of personal pronouns, the statistics and findings are mostly similar, with a few important exceptions. The use of "I", which is much higher in the victory speech, even

though the conclusions about its use are similar in both of Obama's speeches (Ye concludes that "I" portrays Obama as a sincere person ready to repay his gratitude). The higher use of "you" in the victory speech can be related to that of "I" in terms of use of the "I-you" pattern instead of "we" like in Obama's inauguration, which I relate to the victory speech focusing much more on personal reflection on the campaign of the elect, while the inauguration is much more about the common journey ahead. Finally, another example of statistics skewed by unpredictable phenomena is visible in the frequent use of "she" in the victory speech, caused mostly by the use of (and repeated referring to) an anecdote involving Ann Nixon Cooper.

6   Conclusions

My analysis shows results which mostly agree with those of Ye and Nur. The differences found in the use of personal pronouns and modals I am able to relate to the different aims of victory vs inauguration speeches. Hence, I demonstrate that analysis of Interpersonal Metafunction is useful here – which would not hold if it led to the same conclusions for clearly different speeches. Thus, I confirm generalizability of Ye and Nur's results in that Interpersonal Metafunction sheds light into structures behind successful speeches, while similarities and differences in results reflect the differences stemming form the situational and/or social context of speeches. Additionally, I advocate for stronger presence of raw statistics in formulating findings. While numbers alone can be skewed due to uncontrollable phenomena, verbal conclusions alone can hide important statistical differences.

References

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Appendix