

# 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: 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” 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 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:

*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 urgency 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 than opting for the more indirect confrontation using 3rd person. Only in 3 cases does he use “you” to address Americans: when using “I-you” 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

### References

- Halliday, M. A. (1970a). Functional diversity in language as seen from a consideration of modality and mood in english. *Foundations of language*, pages 322–361.
- Halliday, M. A. (1970b). Language structure and language function. *New horizons in linguistics*, 1:140–165.
- Nur, S. (2015). Analysis of interpersonal metafunction in public speeches: A case study of Nelson Mandela’s presidential inauguration speech. *The International Journal of Social Sciences*, 30(1):52–63.
- Ye, R. (2010). The interpersonal metafunction analysis of Barack Obama’s victory speech. *English Language Teaching*, 3(2):146–151.