

Transitivity Analysis of President Obama's Speech a More Perfect Union from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar

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Abstract: Obama's friend reverend Wright was photographed with racist remarks that were extremely hostile to whites during his sermon, which shocked the United States and caused Obama's election situation to lag behind. As a result, Obama made this speech to address the situation. The transitivity system under Halliday's systemic functional grammar is used to analyze Obama's *A More Perfect Union* in order to explore the effectiveness and maneuverability of the transitivity system in achieving the purpose of the speech.

Keywords: systemic functional grammar; President Obama's speech; transitivity analysis

1. Introduction

As we all know, the United States is a melting pot of mixed races, in which blacks have experienced a long and difficult process of safeguarding their rights. Today, the overall situation of black Americans is still second to that of white Americans in general. The opportunity for this speech was that Obama's church pastor friend Wright was photographed with racist remarks that were extremely hostile to whites during the sermon, which shocked the United States and caused Obama's election situation to lag behind. People from all walks of life have asked Obama to declare his position, and the two major camps of the Democratic Party have also made a lot of gender and racial discrimination in the face of the media. As a result, Obama made this speech to address the situation. Moreover, as a special stylistic form, speech itself has attracted much attention in the fields of linguistics, language education, narratology, rhetoric and so on.

This paper attempts to make a linguistic study of President Obama's speech *A More Perfect Union* in Philadelphia by using the theory of transitivity under the framework of systemic functional grammar. The process of transitive discourse analysis can be more scientific and objective, help to truly understand the purpose and ideas of President Obama's speech, and feel the practicability of using functional grammar to analyze speech texts.^[1]

2. Systemic Functional Grammar and Transitivity System

Systemic functional Grammar (SFG) is one of the most influential schools in the field of linguistics at present. It attaches great importance to language functions and is of great reference significance to various language-related fields. M.A.K.Halliday, a representative of this school, believes that all cultures reflect some meta-functions of universal significance in language. He clearly points out that there are three major functions, namely, Ideational Function, Interpersonal Function and Textual Function, in which Textual Function can be divided into Experiential Function and Logical Function. According to the language use, these meta-functions can be divided into several semantic functions and their corresponding subsystems, such as conceptual functions including Transitivity System, Voice System and Polarity System; interpersonal functions include Mood System, Modality System and Key System, while textual functions include Theme System, Information System and Cohesion System.

Among them, the ideational function refers to the language expression of people's experiences in the real world (including the inner world). The transitivity system is a semantic system that represents the conceptual function. It is different from the concept of transitivity in traditional grammar, where the transitivity system is the system of clauses. Clause is a central processing unit, and the grammatical structure composed of various meanings is expressed through clause by clause (Halliday, 2008:10).^[2] There are three components in transitivity analysis, namely, Participant, Process and Circumstance.

Process is the core component of the transitivity system, which shows a satellite-like radiation relationship with the participants and the environment. A process can be related to one or more participants and the environment. Participants, process and circumstance are generally reflected by noun phrases, verb phrases and adverb phrases or prepositional phrases in vocabulary and grammar.

Halliday believes that human activities and natural processes can be divided into Material process, Mental process, Relational process, Behavioral process, Verbal process and Existential process. The first three are the main processes. Supported by the theory of transitivity, this study will make a statistical analysis of the process types in the text, and deeply explore the three process types and their main participants, in order to understand the role of process types in conveying the speaker's ideas and intentions in the speech.^[3]

3. Transitivity Analysis of President Obama's speech

In this paper, the first half of the speech is selected for transitivity analysis. The text of President Obama's *A More Perfect Union* speech is divided into clauses, which contain a total of 167 clauses of the transitivity system. There are six kinds of processes, and the frequency and proportion of each process type in the text is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Frequency and Proportion of Each Process Type in Obama's Speech Discourse

Types of process	Number of occurrences (times)	Its proportion in the text (%)
Material process	95	56.78%
Relational process	41	24.65%
Mental process	18	10.78%
Verbal process	6	3.59%
Behavioral process	5	2.99%
Existential process	2	1.21%
Total	167	100%

According to Table 1, the material process occurs the most times and accounts for the largest proportion in the speech discourse, followed by the relational process, and the third is the mental process. Finally, there are three relatively low processes: the frequency of verbal process is almost equal to that of behavioral process, and the existential process occurs only twice. The emergence of this result is not accidental or random, but is related to the purpose, intention and genre of the speech. This speech is carried out against the background of people from all walks of life asking Obama to declare his position on racism. Therefore, in order to turn the tide, Obama chose Philadelphia, which was agreed upon in the Declaration of Independence, and delivered a speech on the theme of the Declaration of Independence of the United States. But in essence, the text is about racial strife and the future of the United States. The specific intention will be further explained in the detailed analysis of each process below.

3.1. Material process

The material process represents the process of doing something, and the speaker will make a lot of use of the material process to state, which is highly credible and objective, which is exactly what the speech, especially the political speech, needs. Based on such a large number of material process descriptions, the speaker convinced the audience of the speaker and responded to the speaker's call to do something, so as to achieve the speaker's goal. The participants in the material process are Actor and Goal, that is, logical subjects and direct objects, which are generally expressed by nouns or pronouns, which can be people or things. It aims to describe "Doing" and "Happening", such as the natural occurrence of an event or the action of a person or other actor.

A total of 95 material verbs appear in this text, accounting for 56.78% of the full text, each of which has an actor, but not all have a goal. The main types of actors are as follows: 1. A noun or pronoun referring to a person; 2. A noun or gerund expressing abstract meaning; 3. A noun expressing an organization or institution; 4. A noun for a meeting. The actors who refer to people can be roughly classified into two categories, one is collective nouns, such as "farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots" and "the founders"; The other is "I" and "we", which reflects that President Obama integrated himself into the masses in his speech, gradually rose to the country from an early age, and described the current situation in terms of his own real situation.

(1) We the people, in order to form a more perfect union.

(2) We set forth at the beginning of this campaign...

In Example 1 and Example 2, President Obama used "form" and "set" to show the objective urgency of the task of building a better union, which is a common hope and one of the tasks set at the beginning of this presidential campaign. And Example 1 is mentioned at the beginning of the speech, and the opening topic is more important.

(3) That we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together - unless we perfect our union...

In Example 3, Obama uses three consecutive material processes "cannot solve", "solve" and "perfect" to express why he chose to run for president at this time. Because he believes that only by working together can we meet the challenges of this era and create a better tomorrow for future generations. He used his own experience and campaign reasons to draw out the theme that building a better union is something that benefits everyone to evoke emotional resonance. The actor "we" is equivalent to putting the speaker (the president) and the audience (the American people) in the same position, making the audience feel the sense of identity and narrowing the gap between the president and the public, thus making it easier to win public support.

(4) A group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy.

(5) Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

Combined with Example 4 and Example 5, Obama uses the words "gathered", "launched", "had traveled", "made" and "lasted" to restore the democratic declaration at that time in the past tense. 1776 was a very important year for the American people. The Declaration of Independence on July 4 declared the independence of the United States, which profoundly expounded the principle of bourgeois democracy and greatly inspired the fighting spirit of the North American people. The declaration emphasizes many ideas, one of which is the doctrine of equality, which makes it clear that equality should include political equality and economic equality. With this well-known background, Obama brought out the issue of racial discrimination that this speech is intended to address, allowing the audience to touch on what he said.

As can be seen from the analysis of the above material process, it is not mixed with any personal emotions and personal opinions, which not only enhances the credibility of the speech, but also invisibly expresses Obama's personal views. It is of great significance in describing facts, expressing feelings and shaping image in this speech.

3.2. Relational process

Relational process is a process that reflects the relationship between things, which can be divided into two categories: Attributing and Identifying. The participants of "attributing" are Carrier and Attribute, and the participants of "identifying" are Identified and Identifier.^[2] The relational process can describe both the external experience and the internal experience like the material process. Its main feature is that in order to establish a "relationship", at least two subjects are required to participate in order to achieve this function.

(6) A Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; ... and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

In Example 6, the word "had" connects "a Constitution" and "law": under the law, the concept of equal citizenship is at the core of the constitution. And Obama also mentioned that the constitution promises people freedom, fairness and a union that can and should be improved over time. "Could be" and "should be" also happen to reflect the attribute relationship between federation and perfection.

(7) I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas...while he was overseas.

(8) I am married to a black American.

(9) I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue...

(10) That in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

In Example 7 to Example 10, President Obama uses many relational processes "be" to describe his unique family background: The son of a black Kenyan and white Kansas woman, he grew up under the care of his white grandparents, when his grandfather went to war overseas. And as an adult, he married a black woman with the blood of slaves and slave owners in her veins. Not only that, Obama also has brothers and sisters of different races and colors, uncles and nieces. An experience like him would never have happened in any other country in the world. With this experience, Obama will not be the most conservative candidate, knowing that we may have different skin colors and come from different places, but as long as we have the same dream, we can make the country better. This belief stems from his own American story.

There are 41 relational processes in this text, accounting for about 1/4 of the total, second only to the proportion of material processes, which is also of great significance to the realization of speech function. This relationship can be both identity identification and feature identification, establishing a link between the work done and the results achieved.^[4]

3.3. Mental process

The mental process is the expression of internal experience, which is mainly realized by four types of verbs: Perceptive, Cognitive, Desiderative and Emotive. It appears 18 times in this text, accounting for about 18.78%. Most of them are verbs that belong to sensory type and cognitive type.

(11) We saw racial tensions bubble to the surface during the week before the South Carolina primary.

(12) A view that sees white racism as endemic... a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel...

Combined with Example 11 and Example 12, it is obvious to use the mental process verb "see" to express the current problem of racial discrimination. Racial antagonism can be a sharp issue on many aspects of the campaign because of the peculiar color of Obama's skin. In South Carolina, the problem of racial tension can be seen in the weeks leading up to the primary. And extreme opinions takes white racism as a matter of course, interpreting the conflict in the Middle East entirely as the result of the actions of Israel, a staunch ally.

(13) Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course.

(14) Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial...

In Example 13 and Example 14, "know" and "hear" made it clear that Obama was aware of reverend Wright's highly controversial remarks. He used two general questions and answers: "Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course." "Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in church? Yes." Respond to still entangled questions. And once again stressed that his condemnation of reverend Wright's remarks is inevitable and beyond doubt.

In short, use mental verbs like these to connect what you want to express with people's expectations, so that people unconsciously and naturally accept the speaker's point of view, stand in the same position with the speaker, and then the audience will spontaneously support him or her.^[5]

3.4. Verbal process

The verbal process is a process of exchanging information through speech. The participants are the Sayer, the Verbiage (speech content) and the Receiver. The clauses that represent the verbal process are more important corpus materials in all kinds of discourses. There are 6 verbal processes in this text, accounting for about 3.59%.

(15) Reverend Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views...

(16) Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country...

In Example 15 and Example 16, Obama uses the word "express" to implement the verbal process. He showed that his former reverend made some fanning remarks that not only deepened racial division, but also undermined the greatness and goodness of the country; offended not only whites but also

blacks. Use indirect speech to show the words at that time as truly as possible. The verbal process is generally subjective, so it does not account for a high proportion in political speeches.

3.5. Behavioral process

Behavioral process describes some typical physical or psychological behaviors, such as breathing, coughing, smiling, etc., which can refer to the externalization of internal experience. Generally speaking, it seldom appears in the course of a speech. In this text, the behavioral process occurs five times, accounting for about 2.99% of the total.

(17) I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations.

(18) That we may not look the same.

For example, the behavioral process verb "live" in Example 17 appears twice in the text, indicating the act of spending one's life. Obama explains why he has unswerving confidence in the American people by describing his own experience. The "look" in Example 18 indicates that although people look different in appearance, as long as they share the same belief, the country will become better and better.

3.6. Existential process

The existential process means that something has existed or happened. Generally speaking, it is very rare in the text, and it only appears twice in this text, accounting for about 1.21%.

(19) There will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation are not enough.

(20) There is no doubt that I would react in much the same way.

Combined with Example 19 and Example 20, this is the whole existence process in this text, both of which use the There-be sentence pattern. Starting from himself, Obama said that there is no doubt that his condemnation is not enough for those who support him if he is considered in terms of his origin, his political stance, and the values and ideals he believes in. Then use rhetorical questions to draw out what kind of person reverend Wright was before, to explain to the audience in detail, responding to the background at the beginning of the speech, why he came together with the reverend.

Although the proportion of existential process is very low, Halliday further points out that existential process still plays an important role in different types of discourse.

4. Conclusions

Barack Obama, a black-and-white hybrid, set a new record for a black man to win the presidency for the first time in American history. His success is not only due to American political and economic reasons, but also due to his wonderful and moving speech. Therefore, his public speech is also worthy of our in-depth study. This paper analyzes the discourse from the perspective of transitivity and makes a simple analysis of six processes, and finds that the choice of a series of process types plays an important role in the realization of the function of the speech text and the expression of the speaker's emotion and intention. In the text, Obama cited some examples around reverend Wright's erroneous remarks, and the central problem is to have a firm belief that if we work together, we can remove part of the long-standing racial pain. And if you want to continue to work to build a more perfect union, there is no choice but to unite. This study proves the possibility and maneuverability of applying Halliday's transitivity theory of systemic functional grammar to speech discourse analysis, and hopes to have a certain reference value for other researchers in this direction.

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