

# Analysis of Personal Pronoun in Biden's 2021 Inaugural Speech Based on the Theory of Interpersonal Function Theory

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**Abstract:** *The inaugural speech is a type of public speech and part of the speech culture. It is also one of the main contents of activities that national leaders often engage in. It embodies not only the humanistic spirit of the society, but also the state leaders' ardent expectations and best wishes for the people and the country. In recent years, the research on speech discourse analysis has gradually aroused the interest of domestic scholars. Although different scholars have different perspectives on this thesis, they have achieved certain results, especially the exploration of speech discourse under the framework of systemic functional linguistics. Based on the theory of interpersonal function in systemic functional linguistics, this paper analyzes the personal pronouns in Joseph Biden's inaugural speech from the perspective of interpersonal function theory and aims to reveal how the speaker uses personal pronouns to achieve his speech.*

**Keywords:** *Discourse Analysis; Inaugural Speech; Interpersonal Function Theory*

## 1. Introduction

The inaugural speech is one of the types of public speeches delivered by leaders of Western countries to the public after the election. Inaugural speeches play an important role during the tenure of leaders of Western countries. First, in the inaugural speech, the leaders of Western countries will express their ideas and beliefs during their administration, and will elaborate on their future plans and a series of measures planned for the development of the country during the administration. For the leaders of Western countries who have just taken office, the inaugural speech is a speech related to whether or not their political career can be supported by the broad masses of people. National leaders need to use inaugural speech to enable more people from different parties to give more support and recognition to themselves, which is conducive to laying a better mass foundation for future measures or a series of measures taken in the process of governing the country. At the same time, it is easier to gain the understanding and support of the masses by adopting the inaugural speech. The most important thing is that leaders of Western countries can declare their presidential status to the whole country and even the people of the whole world through inaugural speeches. This is an important social meaning to defend their rights and consolidate their own ruling status.

This paper selects the text of the inaugural speech delivered by the 46th President of the United States Biden on January 20, 2021 in Washington, USA. In this speech, Biden mainly focused on the country's development history and current development status, and elaborated on the issues of racial discrimination, democracy and freedom in the United States, and the mutual distrust and inaction of people in the country under the influence of the COVID-19 epidemic. This paper will analyze the personal system involved in Biden's inaugural speech from the perspective of Interpersonal Function Theory.

## 2. Literature Review

Halliday published *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* in 1985, forming the theory of systemic functional grammar which becomes a method of language analysis.

Halliday (2000) believes that language has three major functions, which are called conceptual

function, interpersonal function and textual function. Language has the function of expressing the speaker's identity, status, attitude, motivation and reasoning, judgment and evaluation of things. It can also express the speaker's personal experience and inner activities. This function of language is called interpersonal function. Interpersonal functions include mood system, modality system and personal system. He claims that selection of pronouns in a specific context can be used as information for studying the speaker's attitude towards the listener and the relationship between the speaker and the listener (Halliday, 2000:191)<sup>[1]</sup>.

The personal system is mainly composed of personal pronouns: first-person pronouns (I, we, ours, etc.), second-person pronouns (you, yours, etc.), and third-person pronouns (he, she, them, etc.). Many linguists have developed Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Now, many scholars use the theory of interpersonal function to analyze the speeches of national leaders.

Deng Yinghui (2017) intends to start from Halliday's systemic functional grammar meta-function theory, and select Trump's inaugural speech as a corpus. Through research, it is found that the first-person pronouns are used the most, appearing 91 times; followed by third-person pronouns, with a total of 22; second-person pronouns are the least, with a total of 18. Using the personal pronoun "we" in a speech can effectively shorten the distance between the two sides of the speech and convert the speaker's political opinions and even demands into the common goal of both parties. The use of the second-person pronouns "you/your" helps to establish a direct communication relationship between the speaker and the audience, shorten the distance between the two, and give people a sense of intimacy. The use of third-person singular and plural can increase the objectivity of a speech<sup>[2]</sup>.

Ma Yuanyuan (2020) analyzed President Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. Ma used the keynote speech of chairman Xi Jinping in the "Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation" as the corpus, and analyzed it from three perspectives of tone, modality and person, and explored how to realize the meaning of her speech through interpersonal function, so as to spread Chinese ideas and promote China-Africa on the purpose of deepening the cooperation. The study found that the speaker uses the first-person plural "we" as the subject many times to shorten the distance with the listeners<sup>[3]</sup>.

Shang Ximei (2020) analyzed the speeches of leaders of Chinese and American countries at the UN General Assembly. Shang aims to explore the function of the first-person plural pronoun "we" and its collocation with mental process operators in the construction of national image in remarks of Chinese and American political leaders addressed to the United Nations General Assembly from 2009 to 2018. The paper found that the first-person plural pronoun "we" is a high-frequency word in both corpora, but the efflux usage of "we" appears much more frequently in the speeches of American leaders than Chinese leaders, which is in contrast to the two corpora. The core values of the country are closely related; the total frequency of the psychological process collocation with "we" is basically the same in the two corpora, but the two speeches construct different national images through different choices of the type of psychological process and the operators of the specific psychological process<sup>[4]</sup>.

Liu Haoshuang (2021) analyzed the English translation of the 2021 New Year's message. The research shows that: on the personal level, the use of first-person expressions is high, and the first-person can shorten the distance between the speaker and the audience<sup>[5]</sup>.

The research of the above scholars shows that the application of systemic functional linguistics in speech discourse is more and more extensive. Especially the research from the perspective of interpersonal function theory has an effect on guiding about speech discourse. Therefore, the use of Functional linguistics has also become the choice of many linguistic scholars to study speech discourse.

### 3. Methodology

This paper analyzes the interpersonal function theory in Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. This paper mainly takes the personal system in the theory of interpersonal function as the main analysis, including four aspects of "we", "I", "you", "they". And the paper mainly uses the quantitative and qualitative analysis methods to finish the analysis.

AntConc is a corpus analysis tool, which can retrieve the usual data, and the analysis function of the file is also very powerful. In terms of quantitative analysis, AntConc is used to assist in the analysis. The software is mainly used to analyze the sentence types and the frequency of the same word in the speech studied in this paper. Words, phrases and sentences can be searched and analyzed from the search term and the data in the number of target phrases in this paper can be retrieved. In addition, in

terms of text analysis, AntConc is used to filter and classify words and sentences, and the sentence selection of the specific case analysis in the fourth part has been greatly improved.

This paper mainly uses text analysis method to study the text. This paper analyzes the texts of Biden's speeches with the aim of examining the interpersonal meanings involved in the texts. This paper mainly studies from personal system in interpersonal function. In the personal system, the frequency of personal pronoun in speech is mainly analyzed. This paper mainly studies how Biden uses these techniques to express his personal intentions and attitudes, and understands how to use this speech to build a good mass base among the masses and win the trust and support of the masses, so as to achieve the purpose of his speech.

#### 4. Data Analysis

Personal pronoun expresses different interpersonal meaning in social context or situational context. Using personal pronoun can reflect the intimacy of human in certain degree. Personal pronoun of the speech can also help to build and maintain relationship between speaker and listener. The distribution of personal pronouns is shown as follows:

*Table 1: The Distribution of Personal Pronouns*

Personal Pronouns		Number	Percentage
First-person	I	44	80%
	We	96	
Second-person	You	25	14%
Third-person	She /He	1	6%
	They	11	
Total		177	100%

From Table 1, it can be found that the first personal pronouns are of a high percentage. It shows that the speakers usually use the first-person pronoun in addresses. The second and the third person pronouns are less respectively. In this section, how the interpersonal function is realized by the person system in the speech will be discussed.

##### 4.1 First-person Pronoun "We"

From the Table 1, it can be seen that first-person pronoun in plural form "we" is used 96 times. It is found that the first-person pronouns occupy the largest percentage in inaugural speech. It is determined by the features of the inaugural speech. The purposes of speakers are to share his personal plan, provide practical advice and encourage the people. Therefore, the first-person "we" can indicate the speaker's sincerity and shorten the distance between them. And "we" can also present a close and familiar atmosphere and make the listeners feel they are a unity. Actually, the first-person pronoun "we" also expresses the meaning of the all the Americans, USA, and American government in Biden's speech. Therefore, the first-person pronouns will make great contribution to the realize the interpersonal function in inaugural speech. We will analyze some examples in details.

Example 1: We'll press forward with speed and urgency for we have much to do in this winter of peril and significant possibility.

Example 2: With unity we can do great things, important things. We can right wrongs, we can put people to work in good jobs, we can teach our children in safe schools. We can overcome the deadly virus, we can rebuild work, we can rebuild the middle class and make work secure, we can secure racial justice and we can make America once again the leading force for good in the world.

Example 3: The rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism, that we must confront and we will defeat.

In the above examples, the first-person pronoun "we" refers to all the Americans. By using the personal pronoun "we" many times, Biden can not only reflect the subconscious intention of the speaker to tell all the audience that everyone should be a united whole, but also tell everyone the importance of unity by listing some facts, which achieves a kind of emphasis through repeated use and emphasis on the importance of the whole. In the second example, Biden first raised the importance of unity, which refers to the unity of all the American people, so "we" refers to the American people. Then Biden listed a series of measures, such as job security, education security, and issues such as

overcoming the virus, rebuilding the middle class, ensuring national security, and making the United States a dominant force in the world again, all of which need to be led by the American government. It is not something that ordinary people can do. Therefore, Biden uses the first-person pronoun “we” that refers to the American people, in order to arouse the support of the American people for the current government. In the third examples, through using of the word “we” in the speech, the speaker’s desire for everyone to unite as a whole is expressed. In addition, this is also a manifestation of the speaker putting himself in the crowd and drawing the distance between himself and the people. To a certain extent, this can also make it easier for the audience to accept their proposals and ideas.

Example 4: Hear us out as we move forward.

Example 5: Look, folks, all my colleagues I served with in the House of the Senate up there, we all understand the world is watching, watching all of us today.

Example 6: But the fact is, we face them all at once, presenting this nation with one of the gravest responsibilities we’ve had. Now we’re going to be tested. Are we going to step up?

In both examples, the first-person pronoun “we” refers to the American government led by Biden. In the first example, because supports in the election are mainly divided into two parties, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, and the article mentioned that some people do not support Biden’s election. By referring “we” to the new government, Biden asked people to accept them as they will lead the country to move on.

In the second example, since Biden also won the election by a small margin, he knew that the current situation was not favorable, and he understood that everyone was looking at the actions and measures of the American government, which under his leadership. Therefore, in the two examples, “we” refers to the American government.

In the last example, Biden speaks of the great mission they now have, and they are about to undergo a severe test. This is the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on the American government. The measures and methods taken by Biden after taking office not only represent Biden personally, but more represent the attitude of the entire American government. Therefore, “we” refer to the American government here.

According to the analysis of the above examples, the first-person pronoun “we” appeared most frequently in Biden’s inaugural speech. The first-person pronoun “we” is used a lot in his speech, which includes the meaning of the American people and the American government. The purpose is to better highlight the importance of unity and arouse the people’s heart. At the same time, as the new president of the country, Biden also hopes that the American people can give more trust, support and recognition to the American government under the leadership of the Democratic Party.

#### **4.2 First-person Pronoun “I”**

In Biden’s inaugural speech, the frequency of first-person pronouns was second only to we. In the article, “I” is mainly used to emphasize Biden’s personal qualities, his status as the new president, as well as his determination and plans.

Example 8: I thank my predecessors of both parties. I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

In this example, Biden used the first-person pronoun “I” to express his gratitude to the previous presidents in order to have the qualities of gratitude and tolerance. This is also a wake-up call for people to regain their gratitude, and not let the efforts made by the predecessors for the country be in vain.

Example 9: I’ve just taken the sacred oath each of those patriots have taken.

Example 10: And my first act as president, I’d like to ask you to join me in a moment of silent prayer to remember all those who we lost this past year to the pandemic.

In both examples, Biden used the first-person pronoun “I” to emphasize his identity as the new president of the United States. In the first example, because the oath of office is a duty that only the president of the country can perform, Biden here uses the first-person pronoun “I” to stress that he has just taken the oath, so he emphasizes his current president identity. In the second example, Biden also used the first-person pronoun “I” to re-emphasize his status as the president who just took office by stating his first act as president.

Example 11: And I pledge this to you, I will be a President for all Americans, all Americans. And I promise you I will fight for those who did not support me as for those who did.

In this example, the first-person pronoun “I” appears four times in total, mainly indicating Biden’s personal determination. Biden said that no matter whether the people support his election or not, he will continue to work hard and continue to fight for the future of the entire country and nation. Therefore, in this example, “I” plays the role of showing the determination and confidence of Biden after taking office.

According to the analysis of the above examples, the frequency of “I” appearing in Biden’s speech is the second. As the new president of the country, Biden used the first-person pronoun “I”, which mainly to explain his personal plans, qualities, and to emphasize his presidential identity, with the purpose of paving the way for the next ruling and winning people’s support, to win the approval of the masses.

#### **4.3 Second-person Pronoun “You”**

The second-person pronoun “you” refers to audiences in the speech. As Table 1 shows, the use of second-person pronoun “you” is much less than that of first-person pronouns in address. Because the inaugural speech is a kind of public speech, the speaker usually states his own experience or the others experience as examples to encourage the listeners or provides practical suggestions. But the second personal pronoun also has its function. The use of the second personal pronoun can help to build a face-to-face communicating relationship, and maintain a direct interaction. Meanwhile, it can draw the listeners’ attention easily and make the inaugural speech more acceptable.

The use of the second personal pronoun makes the speaker incorporate into the listeners quickly, so it helps to convey the speaker’s commands and suggestions and the listeners are willing to accept the speaker’s suggestions and encourages. Here are some examples below.

Example 12: And this is certain, I promise you, we will be judged, you and I, by how we resolve these cascading crises of our era.

Example 13: If we do that, I guarantee you we will not fail.

In both examples, the second-person pronoun “you” has an effect on grabbing the audience’s attention. At the same time, it also has an effect on uniting the audience and the people of the country. In the first example, the speaker uses “you and I” to reunite himself and the audiences as a whole, tell everyone that they should be united. In the second example, when the audience hears the word “you” from the speaker, they will naturally think of themselves. The purpose of the speaker’s use of this word is to arouse the audience’s association, which is closely related to them.

The use of second-person pronouns is not very frequent in this speech, but it accounts for 15%. The reason is that by using the personal pronoun “you” in a specific situation, the speaker can attract the attention of the audience. And it is also a manifestation of allowing the audience to improve their self-confidence.

#### **4.4 Third-person Pronoun “They”**

Table 1 shows that the percentage of the third personal pronoun is 5%. The third personal pronouns consist of “he”, “she”, “they” and so on. It is mainly about someone who does not join in the current conversation. The speaker usually uses it to tell the others’ stories as examples, in order to make the suggestions more acceptable and objective.

Example 14: Look, I understand that many of my fellow Americans view the future with fear and trepidation. I understand they worry about their jobs.

In this sentence, “they” is not only to refer to Biden, but also to the people of the United States. The purpose of adopting the third person is to illustrate that most of the people may now be worried that they may face the people of other countries and regions such as unemployment, etc. Therefore, in this sentence, Biden cleverly changed his personal pronouns to tell all the audience that all the difficulties they are facing now are temporary, and those issues such as racial discrimination, unemployment, and medical security will be resolved soon. Therefore, this also increases the confidence of the audience and wins the support of the masses.

Example 15: If we do this, then when our days are through, our children and our children’s children

will say of us: They gave their best, they did their duty, they healed a broken land.

In this sentence, “they” refers to the audiences. By giving advice and encouragement to the audiences, and encouraging them to work hard to address the current problems and turn the current situation around. He proposes what they have done now for the better future of the United States, who shed blood and tears for American democracy and freedom, which will be recognized and be given highly admiration by the younger generation. This is in order to encourage the masses to participate in the construction of American society, and call on everyone to work together to rebuild the order, harmony, freedom and equality of American society.

In Biden’s inaugural speech, the use of the third person is relatively rare. By using the third person, Biden takes the existing social problems in the United States as an entry point, and takes other countries and regions as examples to explain to all the audience that the current problems in the United States are only temporary. This will not represent a long-term trend in the development of the United States. At the same time, as the new president of the United States, Biden envisions that the current efforts of the American people for the better development of society will be highly appreciated and recognized by the next generation. By looking to the public for a bright future, Biden not only enhances the audience’s confidence that they will overcome the difficulties, but more importantly, it is aimed to make the American people believe in his ruling measures and personal plans, and he will definitely make efforts to improve people’s livelihood issues such as racial discrimination, people’s livelihood issues, medical issues, and job security.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on Halliday’s systemic functional grammar theory, this paper is focusing on the interpersonal meta-function in Biden’s 2021 inaugural speech. The text analyzes personal pronouns from the aspect of interpersonal functions, trying to explain how the speaker chooses the appropriate interpersonal expression according to the content he wants to express, so as to have a better interaction with the listener and express his views.

In the analysis of personal pronouns, among the three types of personal pronouns, the frequency of use of the first person is relatively high. In his speech, it was highlighted that Biden regards himself and all citizens as a whole connected with destiny. In addition, in the use of the second and third person, although the frequency of use is less, it is mainly used to guide the audience to self-reflection, and to give the audience advice and encouragement through examples, so as to achieve the purpose of the speech.

By analyzing Biden’s inaugural speech from the perspective of interpersonal function theory, this paper hope to further improve the theory of interpersonal function in national leadership. The vacancy in human speech can also expand the research scope of interpersonal function theory, and is no longer partially limited to the research of discourse texts such as graduation ceremonies. At the same time, it can also provide a greater guiding role for the research of interpersonal function theory in inaugural speech.

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