

# A Study of Michelle Yeoh's Commencement Address from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar

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**Abstract:** *As a world-renowned actress, Michelle Yeoh's work has received widespread attention. But few scholars have done research about her speeches. The paper employs the theory of systemic functional grammar and explores the three meta-functions of the speech discourse. The paper can help readers have a comprehensive understanding of the theory and have a good command of presentation skills.*

**Keywords:** *commencement address; systemic functional grammar; ideational meaning; interpersonal meaning*

## 1. A brief introduction of Michelle Yeoh

Michelle Yeoh is a Malaysian-Chinese actress and producer. Although she has never been trained in martial arts, she relies on her dance skills and on-set trainers to prepare for action scenes in the films. In 2023, for her performance in "Everything Everywhere All at Once", Michelle Yeoh was awarded Best Actress. On May 24, 2023, Michelle Yeoh was invited to attend Harvard Law School's commencement ceremony as a guest speaker. In recent years, there have been many papers related to the research on Michelle Yeoh's films. Few scholars have done research about her speeches. This paper attempts to analyze her commencement address from a systemic functional grammar perspective. □

## 2. Current Research of speeches in China

Chinese scholars have achieved fruitful results in the study of speeches from different dimensions and angles. Zhou Zhengyang and Guan Yuhua (2023) adopt a three-dimensional analysis framework and clarify the translation difficulties of Boris's speeches<sup>[1]</sup>. Liu Luda and Liu Mengtian (2023) compare the use of interactional meta-discourse by building two self-compiled corpora of 3MT presentations and master's theses abstracts<sup>[2]</sup>. Tang Jiali (2021) analyzes the videos of Theresa May's addresses by adopting the theoretical framework of dynamic multimodal discourse analysis<sup>[3]</sup>.

From the literature review, Chinese scholars have used different theories such as multimodal discourse analysis, adaptation theory and critical discourse analysis to analyze speech discourses, opening up new theories and methods for the study of speeches.

## 3. General introduction of systemic functional grammar

Halliday developed the systemic functional grammar which has been recognized as a useful and interpretive framework for language research. According to him, the clause structures play three meta-functions, namely ideational, interpersonal and textual functions<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 3.1 The ideational meaning

The ideational meanings are related to the reality representation in language. The ideational meaning has two components, namely logical meaning and experiential meaning<sup>[5]</sup>. The experiential meaning is expressed through the Transitivity or processes. There are six types of processes.

The material process is that some actions are undertaken by some entity. The material process usually includes two participants, namely actors and goals. Besides, the clauses include other

participants such as circumstances. There are seven different types of circumstances in clauses, such as cause, location, manner, accompaniment, etc.

The mental process is related to psychological reactions, such as thoughts, feelings and perceptions. The verbs of mental process include think, like, see, hear, etc. All mental processes are transitive because there are two participants involved, namely sensors and phenomenon. The behavior process is related to physiological and psychological behavior<sup>[5]</sup>. The words expressing behavior process include “breathe”, “cough”, “dream”, “laugh”, “taste”, etc.

The verbal process is related to speech action. The verbal process is always characterized by a sayer and a receiver. existential process is related to the experience of existence. The words expressing existential process include “be”, “exist”, “arise”, “occur”, etc. The relational process represents a relationship between two terms. It is characterized by the carrier and the attribute.

### 3.2 *The interpersonal meaning*

The interpersonal meaning of clauses reflect a relationship between the speaker and hearer. There are some structural elements linked to interpersonal meaning such as mood structure and modality.

According to Halliday, the basic speech roles include giving and demanding. Besides, there are two types of commodity that we exchange, namely goods and service or information. The combination of the speech roles and commodity lead to the four main speech functions including question, statement, command and offer. Statement is typically expressed by declarative mood while question is typically expressed by interrogative mood. Command is expressed by imperative mood while offer is expressed by modulated interrogative mood.

When we exchange information, the information is either affirmed or denied. However, there are other possibilities aside from being positive or negative. The intermediate degrees between being positive or negative are referred to as modality. Modality is used to argue probability, frequency, obligation and inclination. The modal operators can be classified as being high, median or low. The high value of modality is fulfilled by modal operators such as “must, have to, need, can’t, mustn’t, etc.” the median value of modality is fulfilled by operators such as “should, ought to, shouldn’t”. The low value of modality is fulfilled by operators such as “may, might, could, may not, might not, etc.”

### 3.3 *The textual meaning*

The textual meaning is realized by the ordering of clause constituents. It makes a cohesive and coherent text. Without textual meaning, the ideational meaning or interpersonal meaning can’t be realized. According to Halliday, the theme of a clause is the element that serves as the starting point for the message<sup>[4]</sup>. The theme is always related to the familiar or given information. The rheme of a clause is the part of the clause in which the theme is developed<sup>[5]</sup>. It is related to new or unfamiliar information.

## 4. An analysis of the address from the perspective of systemic functional grammar

By employing the theory, the paper wants to reveal how speech discourses enhance communication through the realization of ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings.

### 4.1 *The ideational meaning in the speech discourse*

The ideational meaning means how we express reality in language. It is realized through the transitivity system or six processes. From the analysis, there are five processes realized in the discourse. Among all the types of process, the material process is the dominant one because it takes up 53% of all. The second most percentage part is relational process which takes up 30% of all. The next three processes are mental process (13.5%), verbal process (2%) and existential process (1.5%).

The material processes are processes of action or doing something. The speaker wants to give information and introduce the experience by employing material process.

1) So do **allow** me to **offer** some simple pointers that I’ve **picked up** along the way in my career full of leaps and dives.

2) More importantly, I **trained** in my mind to be still, to silence the whispers of self-doubt.

In the first example, “allow” is a material process, the actor is the audience which is omitted in the sentence. The goal is “me”. Another material process is “offer”. Its goal is “some simple pointers”. These processes indicate that the speaker has gained a lot of experience from the ups and downs of her career and she wants to share her experience with all the graduates from Harvard Law School. In the second example, “train” is the material process. The actor of the clause is “I”. The element of “to be still” and “to silence” are the circumstances of accompaniment. It indicates that the speaker attaches great importance to dance training because it makes her more confident.

The relational process is about the established relationship between two entities, such as a quality, a classification or an identity. It has two participants, namely carrier and attribute. In the speech discourse, the relational process is used to illustrate the abstract concepts.

3) *The first one is pretty obvious, but not always easy. Stay loose.*

4) *I knew at a very young age that my gift was to communicate through movement.*

In the third example, “is” represents the relational process. The carrier is “the first one” which means the first piece of advice. The attribute is “pretty obvious” and “not easy”. By employing relational process, the speaker wants to convey that to stay loose is easier said than done. In the fourth example, the relational process is represented by “was”. The carrier is “my gift” and the attribute is “to communicate through movement”. The speaker wants to show that she knew from a very young age that her talent was dancing and acting.

Aside from material process and relational process, the address adopts mental process. The mental process is related to perception, affection or cognition. It is characterized by a sener and the phenomenon. The speaker adopts mental process to convey the viewpoint, understanding and perception of some entities. Take 5 and 6 as examples.

5) *I suffered a spinal injury and just like that. I **watched** everything vanish into thin air: Life, as I **knew** it, was over.*

6) *I soon **realized** that what I wanted to play were the action roles: The Heroes.*

In example 5, the mental process is expressed by the words “watch” and “knew”. The sener in the clause is “I” which refers to the speaker, Michelle Yeoh. Besides, the clause in example 5 is characterized by projection which means one clause is related to another one. The clause “I watched” projects a second material process “everything vanish into thin air”. Similarly, the clause “I knew” projects the second relational process “life was over”. By employing mental process, the speaker wants to convey that she spent a time of gloom and depression because of her injury. In example 6, the mental process is represented by “realized”. The clause “I realized” projects a relational process, that is “what I wanted to play were the action roles”. In this way, the speaker wants to indicate that She has clearly defined her goal. She wants to be an actress in action films.

Aside from the three dominant processes mentioned above, there are two other processes in the address, namely, verbal process and existential process. The verbal process is related to what is saying. It is characterized by three participants, namely sayer, receiver and verbiage. Take 7 as one example:

7) *So I went to my producer and **said**, I did say, “please, I want an action role.”*

In example 7, the sayer is “I”, Michelle Yeoh. The receiver is the producer and the verbiage is the content of speech: “I want an action role”. By employing verbal process, the speaker recreates the scene vividly. She wants to indicate that she genuinely wanted the role and to be an actress in the action movies.

The existential process is represented by the clause of “there is/ was something”. Take 8 as one example.

8) *Honestly, **there were times** I had doubts as to whether I was doing the right thing in waiting.*

In example 8, the existential process employs the verb “were”. The existent, the only participant in the process is “times”. By employing existential process, the speaker wants to indicate that she also had moments of hesitation and uncertainty.

#### 4.2 The interpersonal meaning in the speech discourse

The interpersonal meaning is represented by mood and modality. The mood structure includes declarative mood, interrogative mood and imperative mood. After exploring the whole address, the

paper finds that the declarative mood is the most frequently used in the speech discourse. It takes up 95% of all the mood structures. Other structures include imperative mood (2.5%) and interrogative mood (2.5%). A clause of the declarative mood is used to give information while imperative structure is used to make a command. An interrogative mood is used to demand information or to give goods and services. From analysis, the conclusion can be drawn that the function of the commencement address is to provide information. By employing declarative mood, the address is more instructive and persuasive. Take 9 and 10 as examples:

9) *Limitations set by yourself gives you boundaries to respect, but limitations set by others gives you boundaries to bust through.*

10) *My achievements are the results of those around me who offered and continue to offer support and belief.*

In the speech, the speaker employs clauses of declarative mood to share stories about her career as an actress. By employing declarative mood, the speech sparks the interest and resonance of the audience. Besides, the declarative mood is used in making conclusion and giving advice. In this way, the speaker wants to convey the importance of knowing limits and maintaining friendship.

There are a few clauses of imperative and interrogative mood. Take 11 and 12 as examples:

11) *Why have I been asked to deliver the keynote speech to you on this pivotal day in your lives as you dive headfirst into a presumably bright but unpredictable future?*

12) *I was regularly running on rooftops, riding motorcycles onto moving trains, and rolling off vans onto oncoming traffic. Don't try that at home, OK?*

In example 11, the speaker adopts the interrogative mood to fulfill the interactive function of speech discourse. The speaker wants to use the question to ask the audience to think about the purpose of the speech. It attracts the audience and reduces the distance between the speaker and listeners. In example 12, the speaker introduces the dangerous experience in the action movie. By adopting imperative mood, the speaker hopes that listeners won't blindly imitate movie actions because they can cause injuries.

Aside from the mood system, the address also adopts modal operators. Modality is related to the degree of probability, frequency, obligation and inclination in a proposition. Modal operators can be classified according to the degrees. From the analysis of speech discourse, the modal operators with a high degree occupies a higher percentage than the modal operators with a low degree. The high modal operators take up 62% while the low modal operators take up 38%. Examples are provided as follows:

13) *Of course, these were then reserved exclusively for men, but I **could** see that the outfight sequences were highly choreographed.*

14) *I knew in my bones that my dance training **would** allow me to excel at them if only I were given the chance.*

15) *I had a one-shot to prove my bankability as an action star and if I failed, I **would not** get that opportunity again.*

16) *Well, **maybe** the reason I'm here is because I happen to have some experience leaping off high purchase into scary voids.*

In example 13, the modal operator “could” has a low degree. It expresses the ability and probability. By adopting the modal operator, the speaker wants to indicate that when she first ventured into action films, she was cautious and worried about whether she could be accepted in such a male-dominated industry. In example 14, the modal operator “would” has a high degree. It expresses probability. The operator conveys that the speaker was confident in her dancing skills and she believed she would stand out from the crowd. Similarly, in example 15, the speaker employs a high modal operator “would not” and illustrates the enormous pressure she faces. In example 16, “maybe” is a low modal operator. It shows the speaker's humble attitude and makes the audience feel respected.

### 4.3 The textual meaning in speech discourse

The theme can be divided into two types, namely marked theme and unmarked theme. Unmarked theme conflates with the mood structure constituents such as the subject. Marked theme conflates with any other constituent from the mood system, such as circumstances<sup>[5]</sup>. According to Halliday, the unmarked theme expresses the viewpoint or explains something<sup>[4]</sup>. The marked theme indicates that the

clauses are doing something quite different from preceding clauses<sup>[5]</sup>.

From analysis, the unmarked theme takes up 73% of all the themes while 27% of the themes are marked. Examples are provided as follows.

17) *Initially, cast in stereotypical roles, the demure, docile, damsel in distress, I soon realized that what I wanted to play were the action roles: The Heroes*

18) *With every nick and scratch, and bruise, and fractured vertebrae, I came back better and braver.*

19) *My definition of community is vast, including my family, loved ones, and friends.*

20) *Seeing through other people's perspective activates our compassion.*

In example 17, the clause starts with a marked theme, namely “initially”. By placing the circumstance at the beginning of the sentence, a particular part of the clause is emphasized. In this way, the speaker wants to convey that she wanted to be an action film actress and break the stereotypes that trapped many actresses. In example 18, the theme is “with every nick and scratch, and bruise, and fractured vertebrae”. The subject is “I” and doesn’t coincide with the theme. With this marked theme, the speaker indicates that all the injuries have made her stronger and more confident.

In example 19, the theme is “my definition of community”. As an unmarked theme, it is in the position of the subject. Employing the unmarked theme, the speaker wants to express that she enjoys making friends extensively. Her friends have allowed her to expand her horizons and gain more support and trust. In example 20, the theme is “seeing through other people’s perspective”. It is an unmarked theme because it’s in the position of the subject. Besides, it is a complete grammatical unit. By employing the unmarked theme, the speaker wants to emphasize the importance of considering problems from the perspective of others.

## 5. Major findings

The paper analyzes the commencement address of Michelle Yeoh from the perspective of systemic functional grammar. From the perspective of ideational function, the material process is a dominant process. By adopting material process, the speaker shares her professional experience with the audience and encourages the listeners to be curious and embrace the world when things get tough. From the perspective of interpersonal function, the speaker mainly adopts the clauses with declarative mood. It makes the speech instructive and persuasive. Besides, the employment of clauses with interrogative mood enhances the communication between the speaker and the audience. Modality is also adopted in the speech. The high modal operator conveys the confidence and boldness while the low modal operator expresses the modesty of the speaker. Finally, the speech employs more unmarked theme than the marked theme. The analysis of the speech can help readers have a comprehensive understanding of systemic functional grammar. It can help readers to speak in an effective way.

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