

A Comparative Analysis of New Year Speeches: Exploring Discourse Patterns in Chinese and British Contexts

Chen Chen

Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, 100083, China

Keywords: New Year speech; Critical discourse analysis; Systemic functional grammar

Abstract: Based on the theory of critical discourse analysis and the method of system functional grammar, this study utilizes Wordsmith software to construct a delimited corpus. The corpus comprises the English translations of the Chinese New Year's addresses spanning from 2021 to 2024 and the New Year's addresses of the British Prime Minister. Through a critical examination, this paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the modal system and mood system within the selected discourses. The primary objective is to discern the linguistic nuances characterizing the New Year's speeches under different contexts, with the ultimate aim of elucidating how adept employment of linguistic strategies can enhance the efficacy of political speeches.

1. Introduction

From 2021 to 2024, the global landscape has undergone profound transformations, with nations gradually emerging from the shadows of the epidemic and transitioning towards economic recovery, development, and post-epidemic reconstruction. Over these four years, both China and the UK have conveyed their New Year's speeches via video, transforming these speeches into significant indicators of societal shifts. Within this context, the linguistic attributes of these New Year's speeches encompass political meaning and interpersonal functionalities.

Given the temporal and discursive congruence of these speeches, there exist certain parallels in the expressions from both nations. Nonetheless, disparities rooted in national conditions, cultures, and ideologies manifest in distinct language usage and the interpersonal meaning achieved in their respective addresses.

To address this, the present study employs critical discourse analysis and systematic functional grammar to investigate the English translations of the Chinese New Year's Addresses spanning 2021–2024, alongside the British Prime Minister's New Year's Messages. Utilizing a meticulously constructed corpus generated by Wordsmith software, this paper scrutinizes the linguistic characteristics of these addresses, aiming to discern patterns and strategies that maximize the effectiveness of political discourse.

The findings reveal that judicious utilization of modal verbs of varying degrees in speeches yields divergent effects. Specifically, an extensive application of modal terms possessing median value and low value contributes to heightened public receptivity and reinforces the overall communicative efficacy of the discourse.

Furthermore, distinct categories of mood sentences serve varied communicative purposes.

Declarative sentences, for instance, facilitate the objective presentation of facts and find the most frequent application in the context of New Year's speeches. Interrogative sentences, while capable of eliciting audience interest and fostering interaction, are infrequently employed. On the other hand, the utilization of exclamatory sentences imbues the speech with heightened emotion, amplifying its appeal and effectively realizing interpersonal meaning. Imperative sentences, by expressing appeals, suggestions, and demands, inherently imply power relations. The judicious deployment of diverse sentence patterns within the discourse can optimize the political and interpersonal functions of the speech.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The critical discourse analysis

Fowler (1979) initially introduced the concept of "critical linguistics" in his seminal work, "Language and Control."^[1] This theoretical framework laid the foundation for the subsequent development of critical discourse analysis during the late seventies of the twentieth century. Over the years, critical discourse analysis methodologies have evolved beyond a focus solely on social politics, delving into a linguistic exploration of the intricate relationships between power, control, and domination inherent in language.

In contrast to Western scholarship, China's engagement with critical discourse analysis and research commenced later, resulting in a relatively recent development of analytical systems and research paradigms. Critical discourse analysis predominantly concentrates on domains such as news reports and political speeches, with limited attention given to New Year's addresses. Noteworthy exceptions include Hu Fang's (2023) comparative exploration of the interpersonal meaning embedded in New Year's speeches spanning from 2021 to 2023.^[2] However, the research landscape within this domain continues to evolve, necessitating the emergence of novel comparative studies with updated content to address the evolving content and dimensions of these presentations.

2.2. Systemic functional grammar

Systemic functional grammar stands as a pivotal theoretical framework underpinning discourse analysis. Within the lens of systemic functional grammar, language, serving as a medium for human interaction, encompasses three overarching metafunctions: the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function.^[3]

The ideational function, a component of this framework, encompasses transitivity, which manifests through six distinctive processes: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential processes. Each process corresponds to a specific type of element, delineating varied linguistic expressions. The interpersonal function primarily manifests through mood and modality, aiding in deciphering diverse social relations by scrutinizing the speaker's attitudes and stances, thereby facilitating an analysis of the level of "argumentativeness" within discourse. Moreover, the discourse function accentuates the orchestration of coherent textual structures through both written and spoken linguistic components. These metafunctions, forming the bedrock for the comprehension of meaning, operate interdependently and complementarily, jointly shaping the complex tapestry of language expression and interpretation.

3. Data and Method

This study scrutinizes the English renditions of the New Year's addresses from 2021 to 2024, alongside the New Year's address of the British Prime Minister. Critical discourse analysis is adopted

as the guiding theoretical framework, complemented by the systematic functional grammar methodology. The investigative process is facilitated by employing the Wordsmith software as the primary research tool. The investigation delves into the linguistic attributes inherent in the New Year's speeches of the two nations, employing both quantitative and comparative analysis methodologies.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The modality system

4.1.1. Frequency of modal verbs use

According to Halliday's division of modal intensity, English modal verbs can be divided into low-value modal verbs, such as "can", "may", "could", "and might", median-value modal verbs such as "will", "shall", "should", "would", and high-value modal verbs, such as "must", "need", "have to", etc.^[4]

Using Wordsmith software, the author analyzed the modal verbs in the corpus and their frequencies, as shown in the Table 1 and Table 2:

Table 2: Statistics on Modal Verbs and Their Frequency in New Year Speeches in 2021-2024

Value of modality	Modal Verb	China	British
Low	May	5(0.0974%)	1(0.0634%)
	can	8(0.1558%)	9(0.5707%)
	could	1(0.0195%)	3(0.1902%)
	might	0	0
Median	will	31(0.6036%)	12(0.7609%)
	shall	1(0.0195%)	0
	should	8(0.1558%)	1(0.0634%)
	would	3(0.0584%)	1(0.0634%)
High	Must	6(0.1168%)	1(0.0634%)
	need	1(0.0195%)	1(0.0634%)
	Have to	1(0.0195%)	0

Table 3: Statistics on Types of Modal Verbs in New Year Speeches in 2021-2024

Country	Low	Median	High	Total
China	14(22%)	43(66%)	8(12%)	65(100%)
British	13(45%)	14(48%)	2(7%)	29(100%)

Political speech is a unique style of writing, characterized by its persuasive, targeted, appealing, and logical nature. These attributes significantly influence the selection of modal verbs, the articulation of modal meaning, and their consequential impact. Through a meticulous analysis of the modal system employed in such discourse, one can discern the extent of the speaker's accountability for the credibility of the proposed statements and the commitments or obligations assumed for future conduct. Additionally, this examination allows for a deeper comprehension of the social distance and power dynamics inherent in the relationship between the speaker and the addressee.^[5]

Regarding the selection of modal verbs in the English translation of the Chinese New Year speeches, there is a notable inclination towards utilizing median modal verbs, constituting 66% of the overall choices. In the case of the British Prime Minister, there is a relatively consistent utilization of both low-value and median modal verbs, accounting for 45% and 48%, respectively.

4.1.2. Low-value modal verbs

The utilization of low-value modal verbs allows the speaker to assume a diminished modal responsibility, concomitant with an inherent uncertainty surrounding the presented proposition or proposal. Such modal choices suggest a nuanced manifestation of influence, veiled yet perceptible.^[7] In the context of political speeches, this deliberate application of low-value modal verbs affords a heightened degree of latitude for the audience to articulate their perspectives. Furthermore, it imparts a sense of politeness and respect, strategically mitigating the authoritative undertones. This strategic linguistic approach effectively facilitates the audience's acceptance of facts, directives, and requisitions posited by the speaker.

Examples are as follows:

“...And I want to speak directly to all those who have yet to get fully vaccinated – the people who think the disease can't hurt them.

Look at the people going into hospital now, that could be you.

Look at the intensive care units and the miserable, needless suffering of those who did not get their booster, that could be you.”

(British New Year speech, 2022)

In addressing the matter of vaccination as a response to the epidemic, British New Year Messages employed the term "could" to articulate his directives with a euphemistic and tactful tone. Through this linguistic choice, it expresses a desire for the populace to address the challenges posed by the novel coronavirus through the act of vaccination.

4.1.3. Median-value modal verbs

Systemic functional linguistics posits that the selection of a specific modal value by the speaker corresponds to a certain degree of commitment to the proposition or proposal, varying along a spectrum of higher or lower levels of commitment. Modal verbs characterized by excessively low intensity denote reduced responsibility while also indicating a sense of uncertainty, thereby diminishing the strength of persuasion. Conversely, higher magnitude modal verbs may inadvertently position the speaker in a more passive stance due to heightened responsibility, simultaneously projecting a forceful demeanor that could evoke negative sentiments among the audience. The application of median modal verbs addresses these shortcomings, offering a balance that enhances persuasiveness, conveys politeness, and employs euphemistic expressions effectively.

The word “will” was widely used in their speeches, for example:

“And I think it will be the overwhelming instinct of the people of this country to come together as one United Kingdom – England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – working together to express our values around the world, leading both the G7 and the COP26 climate change summit in Glasgow.”

(British New Year speech, 2021)

The 2021 British New Year Message strategically employs the word "will" to solicit proactive engagement and endorsement for the G7 and the 26th climate change summit of the General Assembly. The utilization of such language indicated that if the audience rejected such decisions and actions, it would be contrary to the instinct and nature of a British. Ultimately, such linguistic maneuvers serve to mobilize the collective consciousness of the entire nation towards the specified objectives.

“We're also tackling illegal migration and stopping criminals from abusing our asylum system. I'm not going to pretend that all our problems will go away in the New Year.”

(British New Year speech, 2023)

The 2023 British New Year Message addressed the persisting problems, employing the median modal verb "will." This linguistic choice not only imparts objectivity and persuasiveness to his

viewpoint but also strategically situates him in an enduringly active position, fostering a positive and confident stance toward the resolution of future issues. By employing this particular modal value, folks are afforded the capacity for objective prognostication of forthcoming circumstances, concurrently cultivating a positive mindset equipped to confront and resolve challenges and problems proactively.

In the 2022 English rendition of the Chinese New Year’s address, the term "will" is used to embody a heightened degree of politeness and regard for the audience. In the English translations of the Chinese New Year’s Addresses, the translator conveys respect to “all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation” through such expressions and extends a call and expectation for their participation in national construction. This approach significantly diminishes the perceptual distance between the speaker and the audience, consequently augmenting the audience’s favorability and acceptance of the message.

In the 2024 Chinese New Year’s Address, to address more delicate political matters, the translator strategically employs the term "should." This strategic linguistic choice possesses the advantage of eschewing any semblance of coercion, particularly to the Taiwanese populace, thereby guiding the audience to respond to the call within the framework of utmost respect. The measured use of "should" mitigates the imposition of a directive tone and encourages a response predicated on mutual respect.

4.1.4. High-value modal verbs

High-value modal verbs in English political speeches are infrequently employed due to their inherent weight of modal responsibility. Frequently, these verbs are amalgamated with the inclusive pronoun "we" within the speech corpus to attenuate their potentially overbearing or excessively authoritative tonality. This strategic coupling aims to soften the impact of these robust modal verbs, thereby fostering a sense of collaborative engagement rather than imposing a directive or imperative stance upon the audience.

In the 2022 Chinese New Year’s Address, "we" is used as the subject and a unified identity emerges encompassing the speaker and the audience, fostering a sense of shared interests and thereby establishing a symbiotic relationship. This convergence creates a sense of parity, fostering an "equivalent" connection that effectively diminishes the perceived distance between the two parties, promoting a shared sense of commonality and mutual objectives.

4.2. The mood system

4.2.1. Frequency of mood sentences use

Table 4: Statistics on Types of Mood Sentences in New Year Speeches in 2021-2024

Country	Declarative Sentences	Interrogative Sentences	Exclamation Sentences	Imperative Sentences	Total
China	255(91%)	0	17(6%)	8(3%)	280(100%)
British	66(90%)	0	3(4.6%)	4(5.4%)	73(100%)

As shown in Table 3, functional linguistics posits that language embodies four distinct semantic functions—namely, "providing," "declaring," "commanding," and "asking." These functions find expression through various linguistic moods, such as the statement, imperative, and question. In responding to the identified semantic functions, the speaker implicitly seeks a reciprocal response: the acceptance of an offer, acknowledgment of a statement, execution of a command, or a response to a question.

In the paradigm of linguistic exchange, the customary characterization of the act of speaking may aptly be termed "interaction." This conceptualization underscores language as an exchange wherein

giving corresponds to receiving, and the act of asking is reciprocated through the act of answering—an intricate interplay denoting the reciprocal nature inherent in communicative acts.^[6]

4.2.2. The use of declarative sentences and interrogative sentences

In the realm of political speech, the imparting and proclamation of information constitute pivotal strides toward realizing the communicative objectives of a speech. This facet is primarily achieved through the statement of tone.^[8] Noteworthy is the emphasis on furnishing a comprehensive array of factual information during the respective New Year's addresses among the two nations, offering the audience a panoramic insight into the prevailing national circumstances of the preceding year. So the syntactic choice observed in these addresses is the pervasive utilization of declarative sentences.

An additional facet deserving consideration is the medium through which these speeches were delivered—an exclusive video format. This modality inherently limits the interactive dimension of communication, thereby influencing the speakers' linguistic choices. Consequently, both sides refrained from deploying interrogative sentences in the delivery of their messages although the interrogative tone advantages eliciting audience engagement and interaction in public speaking.

4.2.3. The use of exclamation sentences

Both nations strategically employed an exclamatory tone in their speeches, thereby imbuing the discourse with heightened emotional resonance and increased infectiousness. This intentional linguistic choice serves to effectively convey interpersonal meaning, fostering a stronger connection with the audience. A case in point is the adept utilization by the British New Year Messages of exclamation sentences at both the commencement and conclusion of the address. These sentences are specifically crafted to extend New Year's greetings to the populace while concurrently articulating his anticipations and aspirations for the forthcoming year, underscoring a nuanced approach to interpersonal communication.

4.2.4. The use of imperative sentences

As evident in the tabulated data, the British New Year Speeches consistently employ the imperative tone with greater frequency. Within the context of political discourse, the customary objective is to advocate for the political agenda of either an individual or a nation, encompassing governance propositions and the articulation of counsel, suggestions, or requests. In this regard, imperative sentences emerge as an effective linguistic tool for realizing interpersonal meaning, as they facilitate the expression of authoritative directives and persuasive appeals integral to the communicative objectives inherent in political speeches.^[2] The examples are as follows:

“So make it your New Year's resolution – far easier than losing weight or keeping a diary – find a walk-in center or make an online appointment.”

(British New Year speech, 2021)

Moreover, imperative sentences often carry implicit indications of the hierarchical relationship between the speaker and the audience. The imperative tone typically conveys that the speaker holds a position of authority. Within the foundational tenets of socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics, the orientation of putting people first serves as the cornerstone. The English translations of the Chinese New Year's Addresses, aligning with this ideology, aspire to cultivate an egalitarian rapport with the populace. Consequently, in the Chinese New Year's addresses, the use of imperative sentences is notably infrequent.

This linguistic choice is reflected in the English translation, where imperative sentences manifest with diminished frequency. When imperative constructions are employed, the translator tends to opt for sentence structures such as "let..." to mitigate the assertiveness and coercive undertones, thereby

attenuating the perceived power dynamics. This strategic linguistic maneuver seeks to neutralize the inherent power relations embedded within imperative expressions.

5. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that within the modal system, a substantial prevalence of median modal verbs is observed on both sides. Owing to distinct socio-cultural contexts and national circumstances, British New Year speeches tend to employ a greater frequency of low-value modal verbs, aiming to foster comprehension and garner public support. Compared with the British, English translations of the Chinese New Year's Addresses frequently utilize high-value modal verbs and employ the inclusive pronoun "we" to consolidate collective national sentiment.

Regarding the mood system, both nations predominantly employ declarative sentences. Limited by the video format, the use of interrogative constructs is deterred. Chinese addresses exhibit a pronounced use of exclamatory sentences, enhancing the expression of emotive content. In the pursuit of political objectives, British speeches resort to imperative constructions with heightened frequency. In contrast, Chinese New Year addresses grounded in a philosophy of people-oriented, seldom employing imperative sentences, thus mitigating perceptions of authoritative imposition.

The investigation delves into the linguistic nuances inherent in the speeches, elucidating both commonalities and disparities in language use patterns between the two nations. Consequently, this research contributes a valuable reference for optimizing the efficacy of speeches through the strategic adjustment of language features. Furthermore, it introduces a novel research perspective for the comparative analysis of political discourse, thereby expanding the scholarly discourse in this domain. Additionally, the study furnishes a fresh research corpus, enriching the exploration of the interpersonal functions inherent in political discourse.

References

- [1] Fowler, R., B.Hodge, G.Kress &T.Trew.(eds.).(1979) *Language and Control*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- [2] Hu Fang.(2023) *A Comparative Analysis of the Interpersonal Meaning of Chinese and British Leader's New Year Speeches-Critical Discourse Analysis as a Perspective*. *Language and Culture Research*, 22-27.DOI:10.19954/j.cnki.lcr.2023.05.032.
- [3] Chen Yumin, & Xu Yashan. (2023)*The Functional Semantic Orientation of Systemic Functional Linguistics: Viewed from the History of Functional Grammar*. *Journal of University of Science and Technology Beijing (Social Sciences)*, 90-98.DOI:10.19979/j.cnki.issn10082689.202209009.
- [4] Li Ang. (2023)*Analysis of modal verbs in English speech*. *English Square*,40-43.DOI:10.16723/j.cnki.yyg. 2023.28.031.
- [5] Li Jie. (2005)*The Expression of Modal and the Embodiment of Consciousness*. *Foreign Language Research*,49-55.
- [6] Halliday. (2000) *Introduction to functional syntax*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [7] Sun Jing. (2011)*Interpersonal Meaning of Modal Auxiliaries in Political Speeches*. *Journal of Civil Aviation Flight University of China*,66-68.
- [8] Zhong Lijun. (2010)*Interpersonal Meaning Analysis on Obama's Speech*. *Foreign Language Research*,80-82.