The Realizations of Interpersonal Function in English News Reports

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Abstract. In the framework of Halliday’s theory on mood and modality, this paper focuses on the different realizations of the interpersonal function in English news reports, through which we can help those who want to learn English through reading English news to understand them better.

Introduction

Language changes with the situation and thus gives rise to many varieties. According to Halliday[1978], the reason why there appear different text varieties is that specific context of situation determines the language user’s choice of meanings. Texts of the same kind form a genre or subgenre, which can be studied from the perspective of “field”, “tenor” and “mode”. English News, as a functional variety, has always received much attention from linguists. From the perspective of “tenor”, we have subgenres such as news reports, editorials, features and etc. This thesis is to analyze the different realizations of the interpersonal function in English news reports from New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Times, and Economist, through which we can help those who want to learn English through reading English news to understand them better.

Halliday’s Study on Mood and Modality

Systemic Functional Grammar considers discourse as language that is functional or metafunctional construct. That is to say, during communication speaker uses language to express various experiences in the real world and the interpersonal relationship which are realized through consistent discourse. Halliday identifies three metafunctions of language, which are at the same level and of the same importance. The first is the experiential function, using language to talk about our experience of the world. The second is the interpersonal function, using language to interact with other people. The third is the textual function, using language to organize our messages. This thesis focuses on the interpersonal meaning of language. As we all know, one of the important aims of language communication is to interact with other people, and to establish and maintain appropriate social relations. When we are communicating, we have certain purposes, such as influencing other people’s attitudes or behaviors, providing information, expressing our own viewpoints on things in the world, etc. All these are included in the interpersonal function which is realized by Mood system and Modality system in the grammar.

Mood and Modality in News Reports

Mood in News Reports

Mood expresses speech functions of statements, questions, offer and command, which are then determined by the exchange system — giving or demanding information or goods & services. Statements are often expressed by declarative mood, questions by interrogative mood and commands by imperative mood.

When giving information, statements are often chosen. Thus throughout the corpus of English news reports, we can see that the dominant mood is naturally declarative mood, which is the best way to pass the information timely and in a convincing way. Look at the following examples:

(1) This weekend, Chileans celebrate their country’s independence from Spain in 1810.
The economy has finally pulled out of the penury inflicted by the end of the Soviet Union and its subsidies.

This kind of sentences are everywhere in the news reports, and readers can be informed of events that happened in the world. Besides, throughout the fifty pieces of news reports collected from different websites both in UK and USA, we identify one interrogative, four imperative moods besides the dominant declarative mood (see Table 1). Since the purpose of news reports is to give information, the massive use of declarative mood is natural. The percentages of different moods in Table 1 confirm that declarative mood is the dominant mood in English news reports.

Table 1. Distribution of Different Moods in News Reports.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total sentences</th>
<th>Declarative mood</th>
<th>Interrogative mood</th>
<th>Imperative mood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number</td>
<td>1277</td>
<td>1265</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>99.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, we also find that the moods that appear in quotes are more varied. There exists imperative mood, interrogative mood, and exclamatory mood. See the following examples:

(3) “Out,” Zoellick finally shouted at him. “Out!”

(4) “Will you help me please?” Faiz Bang begged. ...

(5) Abu Hasna recalled Akhras saying, “My father! My father!”

In the above three sentences, we have imperative mood, interrogative mood, and exclamatory mood. Note that they have one thing in common, that is, they all appear in direct quotes. One thing needs to be explained here is that when we talk about the moods in the news discourse, we do not include the moods in direct quotes. There are two kinds of quotes, direct quotes and indirect quote. When we quote direct speeches, we signal that we are re-using the wording of the other language event just like the above Examples (3) to (5). This means that the projected quote does not need to fit in with the projecting clause in mood, register, dialect, etc. On the other hand, when we quote indirect speeches, we project not the wording but the meaning of the original language event. The indirect quotes are more fully incorporated into the message. There is a greater degree of fitting with the projecting clause: the Mood choices reflect present context and purpose. Specific features of face-to-face interaction in the original language event, such as yes and oh, are normally not re-used.

(6) The governor was asked if he had lost his appeal to Democratic and independent voters who backed him in the 2003 recall, given that he pushed an agenda cast by opponents as hostile to organize labour.

We can tell from Example (6) that the original mood choice is interrogative mood. Someone confronted the governor with a question and the reporter chose the declarative mood and incorporated the question into his statement. In news reporting, we can see lots of direct quotes or indirect quotes. They are deemed very useful for reporters. According to Bell [1991], quotations serve three main purposes in news reporting. First, “a quote is valued as a particularly incontrovertible fact because it is the newsmaker’s own words” [Tuchman 1978: 96]. A Second function is to distance and disown, to absolve journalist and news outlet from endorsement of what the source said. The third function is to add to the story the flavor of the newsmaker’s own words. Quotes are supposed to be brief, colorful. The quotes, especially direct quotes, can cite words from people of different identities and characters, and thus make the news reports more vivid. And some quotes also indicate the source of the information, making the news reports more believable and objective. In direct quotes, the news reporters can express what is in his/her mind through other people’s mouth, thus escaping the responsibility. Direct quotation is the exception not the rule in news stories [Bell, 1991: 209]. Most of the time journalists turn what their sources say into indirect quotes. This puts the journalist in control of focusing the story, able to combine information and wordings from scattered parts of an interview. And the news stories may seem more complete as a whole. One more thing about indirect quotes is that not all sources of the indirect quotes are clearly
and directly indicated, such as an official at the Iraqi Interior Ministry said, Mr. Sadr’s spokesman, the American military command reported, according to U.S officials, said Leila Khan of the International Rescue Committee, etc. We can have the source but not the exact one.

(7) Grokster is reportedly on the verge of selling itself to a company called Mashboxx, which has a similar strategy to go legitimate.

(8) ... and now represent 6% of total music revenues, according to industry estimates released this week.

In Example (7), we are not sure of who exactly reported the event, because by using reportedly the reporter just told us someone else reported it. In Example (8), we get the information that the statistics comes from the industry estimates, but we do not know who released the estimates. In this way, the news reports can retain the effect of quotes, and at the same time obscure the source of the information provided.

Modality in News Reports

Modality is another important tool in realizing the interpersonal function in English news reports. According to Halliday [1978: 340], modality is a representation of the standing point of the speaker either “on validity of the assertion or on the rights and wrongs of the opinions on the proposal”. In other words, it is a representation of the speaker’s attitudes, viewpoints and opinions on the proposals. As we have discussed, there are several ways of expressing modality: modal verbs (e.g. must, can, could, will, etc.), modal adjuncts (e.g. always, usually, probably, etc.), expansion of the Predicator which includes adjective predicator (e.g. be anxious to, be reluctant to, etc.) and passive verb predicator (e.g. be be supposed to, be required to, etc.), and modality metaphor which can be realized through explicit subjective forms (e.g. I think, I believe, etc.), explicit objective forms (e.g. it’s likely that, it’s expected that, etc.), the mood adjuncts related to probability and usuality, and the above-mentioned expansion of the Predicator. We also have nominalization to achieve objectivity. In addition, some prepositional phrases can express explicit objective and explicit subjective orientation of the modalized probability.

Distribution of Modal Verbs in News Reports. Although news reports emphasize on objectivity, expressions of modality can be found in them. Modal verbs are often used in expressing judgments, prediction and possibility. In the 50 pieces of news reports, 308 modal verbs can be identified. The distribution of all the modal verbs in the news reports is listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of the Main Modal Verbs in News Reports.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>modal verbs</th>
<th>must</th>
<th>can</th>
<th>could</th>
<th>may</th>
<th>might</th>
<th>will</th>
<th>would</th>
<th>should</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>occurrence</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rate in the modal verbs</td>
<td>3.25%</td>
<td>9.74%</td>
<td>12.01%</td>
<td>10.39%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>21.75%</td>
<td>26.95%</td>
<td>4.87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 2, we can have a clear view of the distribution of the modal verbs in fifty English news reports that have been selected. The rate of may/might which demonstrates possibility, reaches the proportion of 17.53% of the total modal verbs (the occurrence of may accounts for 10.39% and the occurrence of might accounts for 7.64%). Look at the following examples that use may and might in the sentences.

(9) Two days later, their reclusive leader, known as Prachanda, was less fierce, saying talks with the government might be possible.

(10) Worse may be in store, if some have their way.

The examples above all concern the prediction of the future action, which corresponds with Palmer’s [1990] conclusion that epistemic possibility is marked by may with a meaning of possible that…. The use of might makes the thing appear less certain. Can and could are also modal verbs for permission, ability or possibility. In news reports, we find that can and could are most often used to express possibility and ability. In expressing possibility, the difference between can and may lies in formality, can being informal. If can is replaced with could, the difference does not merely lie in formality but in certainty as well. Look at the following examples:
Further increases in fixed mortgage rates could hurt first-time home buyers as well as homeowners with adjustable-rate loans who hope to refinance into fixed-rate mortgage.

The suggestion that Eriksson’s team can be roused only for raucous occasions may be understandable.

Can, could, may, might are classified into modal verbs of low value. All together the rate of these modal verbs of low value accounts for 39.28% of the modal verbs in total. Among them the occurrence of can accounts for 9.74%, the occurrence of could 12.01%, the occurrence of may 10.39%, and the occurrence of might 7.14% (see Table 2). With these kinds of modal verbs, reporters may signal a lower degree of certainty about the validity of a proposition and thus they can escape responsibility. On their opposite side, we have modal verbs of high value, which are not often used, for the reason that it signals a high degree of judgment, prediction and possibility, which goes against the principles of news reporting. Must, ought to, need, has/had to are modal verbs of high value. In Table 6, we list the occurrence of must, which accounts for 3.25%. It is a comparatively low percentage. The following are the examples that use modal verbs of high value.

Paraguay must understand that the choice is between Mercosur and other possible partners,” declared Celso Amorim, Brazil’s foreign minister, last month.

She must have been hit by something in the stomach,” he said.

Inflation is edging down towards the central bank’s target of 5.1%, which ought to allow a long-awaited easing of money policy.

The modality of high value modals like must, these verbs often appear in direct or indirect quotes, which distance the reporters from the responsibility of the statements. What’s worth mentioning is the use of modal verbs of median value like will, would and should. From Table 2, we can easily see that the proportion of will and would ranks the highest among all the modal verbs. According to Halliday’s [1994] classification, will, would and should all belong to modal verbs of median value. When using these verbs, reporters can avoid expressing their opinions too directly. Would is the tentative form of will [Palmer 1990: 58]. It may be paraphrased as I should think that… or, it would be reasonable to conclude that….Therefore, the modal verb would presents a kind of conditional tentativeness. Look at the following example.

The Times reported this morning that public health officials are working on a new contingency plan for a possible avian flu outbreak, under which hospitals would be overwhelmed, business would falter, public transport would be halted and facilities for burying the dead would prove inadequate.

The modal verb would appears three times in the sentence and all indicate a kind of tendency of the event. Would can also express a person’s will. Look at Example (17).

Mr. Sutherland would not reveal the name of the runner-up, but the Guardian Website reported that it has believed to be Mr. Ishiguro’s novel “Never Let Me Go”

Would here expresses the will of Mr. Sutherland who did not want to reveal the name of the runner-up. Should is a weaker form of obligation than must, and readers will feel less pressure from the reporter.

Disneyland should help almost double tourist numbers this year, according to the city’s tourist authority.

“The buck stops with me,” he said. “…One should not shy away from that, and I would not blame anyone on my team.”

In this section we have discussed the distribution of modal verbs in the fifty pieces of English news reports and we can see that the percentage of modal verbs of median value ranks the highest, followed by modal verbs of low value and that of high value. The use of these modal verbs of different value suggests that English news reports are not as objective as they claim to be. Reporters often adopt a moderate way to express their opinions. Now let us move on to the next section — Modal Adjuncts.

Distribution of Modal Adjuncts in News Reports. Modal Adjuncts have an interpersonal function, telling people reporters’ attitudes towards the proportion, but in an implicit way. The
advantage of using modal adjuncts is also to avoid the responsibilities. Modal Adjuncts consist of mood adjuncts and comment adjuncts. And there are also co-occurrence of modal verbs and modal adjuncts and co-occurrence of two Modal Adjuncts. The distribution of these modal adjuncts is listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of Modal Adjuncts in News Reports.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mood adjuncts</th>
<th>Comment adjuncts</th>
<th>Co-occurrence of modal verbs and adjuncts</th>
<th>Co-occurrence of two Modal Adjuncts</th>
<th>In total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>occurrence</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rates</td>
<td>87.76%</td>
<td>3.06%</td>
<td>7.65%</td>
<td>1.53%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 3, we can see that the occurrence of Mood adjuncts accounts for 87.76% of the total, which ranks the highest. Let us look at the following examples.

(20) *He is perhaps best known for “The Book of Evidence,” which was nominated for the Booker Prize in 1989...*
(21) *But through the Americans extinguished both uprisings and drove Mr. Sadr underground, he was never disarmed.*

The above are examples of Mood Adjuncts, and now let’s look at some examples of Comment Adjuncts, which express the reporters’ attitudes towards the proposition as a whole. Such adjuncts are rarely found in the materials collected (see Table 3). Look at the following two examples from the English news reports.

(22) *Understandably, Ms. Gillard has distanced herself from the endorsement.*

From this example, we can find that Modal Adjuncts really help to voice the reporters’ opinions in an indirect way. Co-occurrence of both modal verbs and modal adjuncts in stating propositions can be found in the corpus of news reports. On the surface, the co-occurrence can be seen as a modifier, but in essence the degree of certainty decreases. For examples:

(23) *Were Mr. Palocci to go, Lula would probably replace him with a like-minded technocrat, such as one of his aides.*
(24) *“If there is any requirement, they will certainly come back to us,” Mr. Saran said.*

Co-occurrence of two Modal Adjuncts is rarely founded in the samples obtained. According to Halliday [1985: 358], it means that the speaker is even less sure of what s/he is saying or lacks powerful evidence to prove what s/he is saying. This can be explained in the Example (27):

(25) *“The Latham Diaries” are the most explosive political document Australia has seen in a long time, perhaps ever.*

The reporter tries to emphasize the influence of the “The Latham Diaries”, so he uses the word “ever” but put “perhaps” before it to make it sound less assertive. On one hand, this can show that the reporter lacks powerful evidence to support what he is saying. On the other hand, this can show that the reporter tries to moderate the mood so that what he is saying is easier to be accepted by the public. We can find the expansion of the Predicator in the English news reports. Look at the following examples.

(26) *According to IPSOS, a polling firm, voters are unwilling to sacrifice low inflation for faster growth.*
(27) *It was supposed to be the couple’s happiest occasion, but little do they know that...*

Modal verbs implicitly express the subjectivity of the speaker’s judgment, while Modal Adjuncts implicitly express the objectivity of the speaker’s judgment [Halliday, 1994: 355]. And the expansion of the Predicator is in the middle, which appears to be not very subjective and not very objective. From the above examples, we can see that the expressions, such as be unwilling to, be determined to, be allowed to, be supposed to, disguise the reporter’s attitude towards the events he is describing.

**Distribution of Modality Metaphor in News Reports.** Modality includes modalization and modulation. Modalization expresses probability and usuality, which can be realized by modal verbs,
such as can, will, may, etc. This is its congruent form of realization. However, it can be metaphorized by Mood Adjuncts, which has been discussed in detail in Chapter Two, and thus will be omitted here. Modalization can be further metaphorized by structures such as be certain (possible, likely, inclined, etc.) to (do), tend to (do), it’s certain (probable, possible, etc.) that…etc. For examples:

(28) A final round of arbitration is likely to result in a lower tariff.

(29) In view of the venue, it is more likely than not that the ICC will want to accept, this time, if possible with all the Test nations competing.

In the above two examples, we can see that the use of structures of it is + adjective makes the statements seem more impersonal and the reporters seem to have nothing to do with the statements. The reporters skillfully avoid the responsibilities. We know that when expressing modality, explicit objective and explicit subjective forms of modality are the two extremes. The structure of it is + adjective can dress the proposition up as if it was not the reporter’s point of view at all. We call it explicit objective form of modality which is strictly speaking metaphorical. However, this kind of structure does not often appear in news reports. On the other hand, explicit subjective forms of modality rarely appears in the news reports, which is quite natural, because “subjectivity” is the thing that is banned in news reports. But we can also find such forms in direct quotes in them. Thus the reporter again conceals his/her own attitude behind those direct quotes.

(30) “I don’t think any of us thought there would be this amount of demand.”

In this example, the reporters use explicit subjective forms of modality in direct quotes. In the surface, these seem like the opinions of the persons whose remarks are quoted. But in fact, the reporters also express their opinions in an indirect way. What is worthy of note is that although the reporters quote other people’s words in order to avoid the direct responsibility, what to quote, whom to quote and where to quote are decided by the reporters. In this way they can express their opinions in an implicit way. Besides those used in quotes, explicit subjective forms of modality rarely appear in the corpus of English news reports. Instead, reporters often use clauses like it’s believed, it’s thought, etc. in order to make the information sound more objective. Modulation expresses obligation and inclination which can be realized by congruent forms, using modal verbs such as must, should, will, etc. And also it can be metaphorized by structures such as be required (supposed, etc.) to (do) or be determined (anxious, etc.) to (do), be keen on (doing), etc. It can be further metaphorized by structures such as oblige… to (do). Nominalization is another device to express modality metaphor, transforming modal meanings into a “thing” as if it were an objective description. The four sentences followed are examples of this kind.

(31)a. Another possibility is Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk...
(32)b. Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk possibly won the title ...
(33)a. The Saudi Government believes that there is a need for between three and four million new homes over the next ten to fifteen years.
(34)b. The Saudi Government believes that they need to build between three and four million new homes over the next ten to fifteen years.

The use of nominalization makes the proposition sound more like a thing and less subjective which accords with the principle of news reports — objectivity.

Conclusion

This present paper mainly focuses on exploring how mood and modality work in news reports. From the analysis of new reports from different websites we have reached the following conclusions. The mood used in news reports is, for a large part, declarative mood. Quotes can make the text seem livelier and also objectively, which helps to attract readers’ attention. This complies with the tenor of the news reports, and they are used in a large number there. The percentage of different forms of modality is not very high in news reports, it is not low either. Modality can be used to express reporters’ personal opinions and intention in an obscure way. To sum up, English news reports are claimed to be objective, but the use of quotes and different forms of modality
reveal that reporters’ opinions and attitudes are sometimes expressed implicitly.

References


