

## Analysis of the Queen's Speech on COVID-19 from the Perspective of Transitivity

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### ABSTRACT

The Queen Elizabeth II recently made her fifth public speech on coVID-19 since taking office. Through the use of systemic functional linguistics to analyze her speech text, this article mainly analyzes the text from the perspective of the concept of function and finds this speech text involves only four processes: material process, mental process, relational process and verbal process. This article discusses the political, economic and cultural characteristics of the UK's response to coVID-19. In addition, this paper compares China and the UK, and discusses the different measures taken in the face of the epidemic and the underlying cultural background. This study found out that the Queen's speech is mainly aimed at expressing gratitude to those working on the front lines of the fight against the epidemic and encouraging people to respond to the call of the British government and face the epidemic positively. The analysis of speech with the transitivity can enrich and update the study contents of transitivity.

### INTRODUCTION

Functional stylistics has been prevailing in linguistic field after M. A. K. Halliday reported one of his papers, *Linguistic Functions and Literary Style* in 1970s. The core of functional stylistics is Halliday's thought about the "functions" of language. He put forward three metafunctions of language, that is, ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. Ideational function means to convey new information, to communicate a content that is unknown to the hearer. It mainly refers to the six processes of transitivity. Interpersonal function means the speaker uses specific language structures as the means of social communication to involve the speech event: the expressions of his comments, his attitudes, his evaluations, and also the relationship he sets up between himself and the listener, which are decided by different communication roles he adopts, like informing, questioning, persuading (Halliday, 2000); Textual function means that the speaker, as an organizer, to connect linguistic segments into a complete and meaningful text in terms of the context of situation. In recent years, the research of functional stylistics is growing vigorously in Chinese academic society. It mainly refers to analysis of literary texts, practical text analysis (such as reports, advertisements, speech, etc.), and the guiding function of functional stylistics towards

translation and English teaching (He Xiao-yuan, 2010). For example, Guan Shu-hong (2005) analyzed Churchill's speech with functional stylistic analysis, Shen Dan (2006) analyzed the literary work *On the Road*, and Zhang Jie and Zhang Lin (2013) analyzed the novel *Old Underwood* from the perspective of transience.

Since the coVID-19 outbreak in late 2019, the epidemic has affected countries around the world. In order to encourage and boost public sentiment, the Queen, Elizabeth II, gave her speech about the epidemic on April 5. It is only the fifth the monarch has given such a speech in her 68-year reign. Shen Dan (2006) points out that stylistic analysis refers to the effects produced by specific linguistic features, and thus has a certain justifiability---the ability to judge whether the analysis is reasonable or not.

This article analyzes the speech contents of the Queen's speech from the perspective of transitivity system of functional stylistics, aims to find out how the author through a particular choice of language to express the theme of the text meaning, revealing the function and significance of the speech, discussing when facing the outbreak of epidemic, the British government and the public reaction to the Chinese government and people of differences, in order to enrich the content of research on and the physical properties.

## DATA COLLECTION

The outbreak of coVID-19 has had a terrible loss and impact in countries. Countries overseas advocate that freedom, democracy and human rights are paramount. In order to slow down the spread of the epidemic, the government advocated home quarantine, which undoubtedly gives the British people an illusion of restricting their freedom. The reason why the Queen of Britain made a public speech during the epidemic is to inspire the people, to inspire the people, and also to remove the dissatisfaction and doubts in the hearts of the people.

The study is based on the original text of the Queen's speech, which was published on the WeChat Official Account of China Daily Bilingual News. It is the bilingual news account of China Daily. As one of the most authoritative newspapers in China, the authenticity and timeliness of its news are beyond doubt. Although the information is true and correct, we find that the translation of the speech varies from newspaper to newspaper. However, these differences can be understood because they are similar in general meaning. This paper is written in English and analyzes the speech content in English, so the subtle difference in translation has no impact on the results and meaning of this study.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The core of Halliday's ideational function is transitivity system, which analyzes the predict words. Halliday (2000) points out that the linguistic structure of a text reflects its meaning as a discourse. By using narrative discourse as a test site for a particular model of language, it illustrates well the usefulness of stylistic analysis as a way of exploring both literature and language (Simpson, 2004).

Transitivity system mainly involves three aspects, namely, processes, participants and circumstances. Processes refer to the process expressed by verbal phrases (e.g., material process, mental process), participants in the process expressed by noun phrases, and circumstances refers to the environmental components involved in the process expressed by adverbs and prepositional phrases (Shen Dan, 1997) There are six processes: material process, mental process, behavioral process, verbal process, relational process and existential process. Material processes are simply process of doing; it is the most commonplace type among the six processes. Mental processes are essentially processes of sensing; mental processes inhabit and reflect the world of consciousness, and involve cognition, reaction and perception. Behavioral processes embody physiological actions like 'breathe' or 'cough'. Verbal processes are the process of articulating conscious thought, basically speaking, the processes of verbalization; It mainly involves the Sayer (the producer of the speech), the Receiver (the entity to which the speech is addressed) and the Verbiage (that which gets said). Relational processes are processes of 'being' in the specific sense of establishing relationships between two entities; existential processes are these processes basically assert that something exists or happens; the typical sentence of existential process is 'there be' sentence pattern.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the great significance of transitivity system, there are a lot of linguists who have studied this theory. In the beginning, Halliday (1981) had discussed the text of William Golding's *The Inheritors*. He analyzed the reason why language construction are different. He argued that different use of different language would result in the differences of language construction. And after his article, a lot of linguists have made similar researches. For example, Wang Yong, Zhou Ying-fang (2020) analyzed the same literary book from the perspective of transitivity and ergativity, and they discussed the typological meaning of that book.

Except for Wang Yong and Zhou Ying-fang, there are also a heap of linguists who have analyzed literary works from the perspective of systematic-functional grammar, such as Zhang Yan (2019), Shen Dan (2006), Zhang Jie (2019) and Ma Yi-han (2019), etc. They all tried to analyze written materials from the perspective of systematic-functional grammar and got some conclusions. All those researches are influential in the study field of transitivity and they all enriched the research content of transitivity.

## DATA ANALYSIS

We found that the whole speech text contains a total of 55 sentences. This section analyzes the original data of more meaningful sentences in the text from the perspective of conceptual function, including both main clause and subordinate clause

Ideational function, whose core theory is transitivity system, is one of Halliday's three metafunctions. Ideational function refers to the concrete expression of all objective factors through language, such as things that exist in the objective and subjective world, people and things involved and the relationship between them, and time and place closely related to them, which reflects a person's various experiences in the objective real world life and is mainly embodied by the concept of transitivity (Ma Yi-han, 2019). The whole speech text contains 55 sentences with complete grammatical structure, all of which involve ideational function (see Table 1):

As shown in the table above, the text involves four transitivity processes: material process, mental process, relational process and verbal process. Among them, there are 22 sentences involving material processes, accounting for 40% of the total; 16 mental processes are involved, accounting for 29% of the total; 14 relational processes are involved, accounting for 25% of the total; there are only 4 verbal processes involved, accounting for 7% of the total, and no

**Table 1.** Results of analyzing the speech text

Processes	Number	Total number of sentence	Accounting
Material	22	55	40%
Mental	16		29%
Relational	14		25%
Verbal	4		7%

behavioral or existential processes involved. This conclusion makes sense from the perspective of logic, as the Queen's speech was designed to give listeners a sense of the power of words and her confidence in the British people, to thank everyone involved in the fight against coVID-19 since it started in the UK, and to call on the British public to stand together in the fight against the epidemic.

Material process is the most common of the six processes, a process of doing something. This study finds that there are 22 sentences in the text of the Queen's Speech that involve material processes, which can be roughly divided into three categories. The main sentences are listed as follows:

- 1) The first category: Epidemics are destructive, bad things
  - (1)...a disruption that has brought grief to some financial difficulties to many,...
  - (2)...those who have lost loved ones.
  - (3)...we are tackling this disease...
  - (4)...we will overcome it.
  - (5)...children who had been evacuated from their homes and sent away for their own safety.
  - (6) While we have faced challenges before...

The epidemic has been described as a disruption that has caused serious hardship in people's daily lives. The word, 'brought' regards the epidemic as real thing that has already happened. The Queen used the present perfect tense of the verb 'lose', which means that some people have already lost relatives and friends because of negative influence of the epidemic. And the subject, 'we', as a participant, suggests that joint efforts are needed. To compare the current outbreak to difficulties that people has faced before, the Queen shows the ruthless and cruelty of the epidemic. It just likes the war where there is no safety.

- 2) The second category: the solidarity Britain deserves, or already has, in the face of the epidemic
  - (7)...who selflessly continue their day-to-day duties outside the home in support of us all.
  - (8)...the nation will join me in assuring you that...
  - (9)...every hour of your hard work brings us closer to a return to more normal times.
  - (10)That the attributes of self-discipline, of ... and of ... still characterize this country.
  - (11)...the United Kingdom has come together to applaud...
  - (12)...we join with all nations across the globe in a common endeavor,...

With the word, 'continue', those on the front lines and those who have stood up for the epidemic continue to persevere, to do their jobs, to strive to restore people's normal lives, and to demonstrate their selfless devotion. The word 'join' unites the speaker with the whole nation, saying that the whole nation will appreciate everyone's contribution to the fight against the epidemic. The speaker also indirectly shows that people, who take part in the fight against the epidemic, make contributions to return the normal life. These contributions are characteristic of the English people and inspire the listener's British nature to feel that Britain has made such a contribution. People from all over the country

and even the world should work together as a group to fight against the epidemic. The Queen hopes that we can correct our state of mind, don't feel sorry for ourselves, and believe that as long as we work together, we will win.

- 3) The third category: expectations for the future
  - (13) We will succeed...
  - (14)..., better days will return:...
  - (15) We will meet again.

These three sentences show that the speaker calls on all people to have high expectations for future success and believe that they will succeed. There is no doubt that it is not the Queen alone who believes that people will succeed in the battle against the epidemic, but that people, including all the audience, believe that people will succeed. The return of better days is sure to come.

Halliday divided mental processes into four categories: perception, cognition, desire and emotion (cited from Zhang Jie, Zhang Lin, 2013). There are a total of 16 sentences involving mental processes in this text. This study finds that the verbs of mental processes that the Queen mainly uses are: want, hope, be sure, appreciate, be able to take pride in, remember, take comfort, etc. It can be seen that the mental process used by the Queen mainly belongs to the category of desire and emotion, which mainly shows the queen's confidence and determination in overcoming the epidemic as well as the gratitude of those who have made contributions to the fight against the epidemic. This point is consistent with the above mentioned that the main purpose of this speech is to express the audience's emotion and encourage the public.

There are 14 sentences in this text that deal with relational processes. The study found that those sentences mainly refer to the link verb, such as remain, are staying, will be, may be, were, etc., which shows the Queen's desire to encourage people to actively isolate themselves at home, and her belief that the epidemic will be defeated and our bright future will be realized.

Only four sentences are examples of verbal processes, using verbs such as am speaking, will say, defines, spoke. Most of these words in the text are used to describe the cruelty and destruction of the epidemic, showing the urgent need for joint efforts to fight the epidemic. The use of the future tense indirectly reflects the significance of people's participation in the fight against the epidemic to their future lives.

In general, through the use of the transitivity system and the speech, the Queen conveyed to the public the confidence and determination to win the battle against the epidemic, and also called on the public to make joint efforts to fight the epidemic.

## DISCUSSION

Britain has had a constitutional monarchy since the Glorious Revolution in 1688. To retain the monarch and achieve republicanism in affairs through constitutionalism, establishing people's sovereignty and restricting the rights of the monarch, the current British political system is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. Today, the queen of The United Kingdom is Queen Elizabeth II, who ascended the throne in

1952, making her the longest-reigning Monarch in British history. Although she is the Queen of the United Kingdom, according to the provisions of the British system, she cannot interfere too much in the handling of national affairs, and only has a symbolic status. And form of her rights is constrained by convention and popular will.

The Queen does not have crucial powers, but she does have three: the right to be consulted, and the right to give advice and warning. The longer a monarch is on the throne, the more experience he has, and the more his opinions are valued by the cabinet and prime minister. As the longest-serving Queen in British history, her experience and knowledge can be easily guessed, so what she says is of great significance to Britain as a whole. The queen's nationally televised address on coVID-19, her fifth public speech outside Christmas in 68 years on the throne, was of undoubted importance. The Queen's speech to the public will have an important impact on the national and national response to the epidemic. In her speech, the Queen encouraged ordinary people to voluntarily isolate at home and contribute to the country's fight against the epidemic. This is certainly more convincing to the British people, who have always advocated freedom, democracy and human rights.

Britain is a highly developed capitalist country and one of the four largest economies in Europe. As a result of the outbreak of coVID-19, the world's economies have been greatly affected. At first, workers in various industries in China took extended holidays. Later, as the epidemic spread, the foreign situation became difficult to control. The number of cases increased day by day. The British government announced the blockade measures on March 23, which undoubtedly had a huge impact on the economy of the whole country, and the economy began to decline. According to the latest figures released by the Office for National Statistics, Gross domestic product fell 20.4% in April from the previous month, the biggest drop since monthly records began in 1997.

Early in her speech, the Queen stresses the need to fight the epidemic by saying that the disaster has brought not only grief but also financial difficulties. If we do nothing in the face of the epidemic, it will affect not only the health of individuals, but also the spirit of a nation, the lifeblood of a country. As the British government gradually lifted the lockdown measures in response to coVID-19 in mid-May, the British economy also began to recover slowly. Although the epidemic has brought huge economic losses to The UK, as a country with a booming economy in the early stage, the foundation of the UK has not been shaken, and it will gradually recover and even develop more vigorously in the later development.

Through this epidemic, we can see the huge difference between Chinese culture and Western culture. The most typical difference is that China is a collectivist culture. The actions we take in the face of the epidemic are based on the belief that "we are one". We should strive for the benefit of all, instead of damaging the interests of the collective for our own selfish interests. In the *Analects of Confucius*, Yan Yuan said, "A gentleman respects but never loses anything. He is respectful and courteous to others. Within the

four seas, all men are brothers." It can be seen that since the Spring and Autumn Period, China has put forward the Confucian thought of the universal family. Although the outbreak started in Hubei province, other provinces and cities in China immediately mobilized volunteer medical teams and rushed to Hubei to help. In the West, on the other hand, under individualism, people think their own self-interest as the most important. In the event of an accident, they would act in our own way. No matter whether they are friends or not, they cannot see the others are better than us. Isolation is the best way to prevent the spread of the epidemic, but this is just contrary to western countries advocated "free" theory. People generally believe that home quarantine is deprived of their human rights, is not willing to cooperate with the government's works of fighting against epidemic, so the Queen of England in her speech, especially for those who answered the call to home isolation expressed gratitude, saying they are protecting the vulnerable groups, make many families from the loss of the kin. The Queen also points out that steadfastness and solidarity are important tools to defeat the epidemic, which is undoubtedly inconsistent with Britain's long-standing promotion of freedom and in line with the idea of common development in China.

The second typical difference between China and western countries is that the Chinese culture contains the concept of "the world is one". We will try our best to help all people under the world. We believe that human beings are a whole. As is said in *Biography of Confucius xiuyuan in Nanshi*, "Xiuyuan's style was strong and upright, his regime was clear and practiced, and he always took the world as his own duty." Chinese people care not only about the development of their own country, but also about the development of the whole human race. One of China's two centenary goals is to achieve overall prosperity and common prosperity by 2020. The political development goal of building a community with a shared future for mankind put forward by General Secretary Xi Jin-ping also calls for common progress of mankind, regardless of nationality. On the contrary, western countries do not have such cultural concepts. Their development is a zero-sum game, and one's gains come at the expense of others. In this speech, the British Queen proposed that we should all work together to fight against the epidemic and win the final victory. It shows that she has begun to realize the importance of a community with a shared future for mankind, and we need to work together in one country, let alone the development of the whole world.

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of transitivity, this paper analyzed the text of the Queen's speech on the epidemic, mainly analyzing the four processes involved in the text of the speech: material process, psychological process, relational process and verbal process. The study found that the Queen had three main goals in her speech: first, calling on the general public to take the initiative to respond to the government's call and quarantine themselves at home to make joint efforts to combat the epidemic; second, expressing her gratitude to the staff who have been working on the

front lines of the epidemic since the outbreak began; third, encouraging listeners to firmly believe that the epidemic will pass and future will be as good as ever. In addition, by analyzing the text of the Queen's speech, this paper also explored the political, economic and cultural impact of the epidemic on the UK. However, there are still some shortcomings in this study, such as not using a more comprehensive systemic-functional stylistics to analyze the text. It is hoped that in future studies, it can be analyzed from more dimensions.

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