

Analysis of Obama's Speech from the Perspectives of Systemic Functional Grammar

Song Yue Shen Ying

Abstract

Textual Function refers to that how people organize information when using languages, it consists of three elements: Thematic Structure, Information Structure and Cohesion. Interpersonal Function is a language function that helps to establish, maintain and confirm interpersonal relationships through mood, modality and person. These two functions together with Ideational Function are named as three functions in Systemic Functional Grammar. The paper aims to discuss Thematic Structure and Pattern of Thematic Progression, Cohesion and Person in *The Audacity of Hope* in order to briefly analyze that how the text develops and also how the speech becomes a huge success.

Keywords: Thematic structure, pattern of thematic progression, cohesion, person, text

1. Related Theoretical Framework

1.1 Thematic Structure

The founder of the Prague School, Mathesius is the one who previously proposes the conception of thematic structure. At the early stage, he comes up with this viewpoint in order to study that how different constituents in one message function in different communicative processes. In his perspectives, the starting point of

message plays an important role as drawing forth topics. This starting point, thus, is named as Theme, the rest is labeled Rheme. Furthermore, he indicates that Theme often refers to new information, and Rheme refers to old information. Halliday's Systemic Functional School approves of the Theme-Rheme Structure conception and draws on this to its own theory. However, it differs from the Prague School in the identification of Theme. Halliday(Halliday,1985)claims that Theme is that with which the clause is concerned, the Theme is the starting-point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause is taking off. In Systemic Functional Grammar, he proposes two conceptions which are Simple Theme and Multiple Theme. The major distinction between these two conceptions is that Simple Theme can not be further analyzed since it only includes Topical Theme. Unlike Simple Theme, Multiple Theme can be further divided into Textual Theme, Interpersonal Theme and Topical Theme. Despite these three kinds of themes, there are also Marked Theme and Unmarked Theme. Marked Theme is that when the theme does not act as the subject of one clause and Unmarked Theme is that however when the theme happens to be the subject of one clause.

1.2 Thematic Progression and Its Patterns

Each clause has its own Thematic Structure. When one clause is not within one specific context, its Theme and Rheme are fixed. However, most texts are constructed with more than two clauses internally related. Thus the Theme and Rheme in the following clause will have some connection with the Theme and Rheme in the former clause. The connection between clauses is realized with the progression process from Theme and Rheme. This is called Thematic Progression. Linguists Danes and Fries conclude some basic patterns of thematic progression, including Radiative Mode, Polymeric Mode, Scalariform Mode and Crossed Mode. Radiative Mode means that clauses in a text share with the same Theme, but with different Rhemes. Polymeric Mode is that clauses in a text share with the same Rheme, but with different Themes. Scalariform Mode indicates that Theme of a clause in a text is the same with Rheme in previous clause. Crossed Mode means Theme or Rheme of a clause is the same with Theme or Rheme in the previous clause.

In language communication, normally information can be fully conveyed by one pattern, but as general, most complex texts are transferred by using several patterns alternatively. Especially in political speech, the choice of Theme and Thematic Progression can contribute to accomplishing the political motives.

1.3 Cohesion

Cohesion is the third sub-system of Textual Function, which refers to semantic cohesive relations between different clauses or different constituents in the same clause. According to Halliday and Hasson (Halliday & Hasson, 1976), there are five cohesive devices, reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion. Reference indicates that

people and things will be no longer named in the following text, they are replaced with pronouns. Ellipsis is used to avoid repetition. Substitution is the replacement of what have appeared in the previous text. Conjunction refers to the connectivity between sentences or sentence group.

1.4 Person

Person, which is one of the most significant ways to realize Interpersonal Function, plays an important role of founding, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships within society.

2. On the Speech

Obama has become widely known since he made a speech at Democratic National Convention in 2004. From then on, some said that they had seen the future of the Democratic Party and predicted that Barack Obama would be the leading candidate for next presidential election. We must note here at the time Obama was not even a congressman, not to mention his achievements in official career. This is a highly successful speech that people even consider the speech as the key for Barack Obama to knock on the door to the White House.

The emphasis of the speech lays on drawing people's attention to identify that they are the same people as Obama, they are new Americans. At the beginning of the speech, Obama starts from his family story. Anyone who approves of his family history approves of Obama himself, approves of the common dream of all Americans. By this means, Obama shortens the distance with audience. Then he shares his thoughts over comparing notes with citizens all across the country, trying to elicit that only the Democratic Party can be qualified to resolve all the existing problems within American society. Afterwards, Obama gradually educes the focus of the speech, that is, to win more

votes for Kerry and Edwards. The characteristics of the speech are that a great number of parallelism sentences are exerted. That contributes to the effect that the fundamental purpose is launched layers of depth, hence the hearers unconsciously accept Obama's ideology and the Democratic Party wins more votes.

This is an interesting speech. Tough Kerry and Edwards do not get elected. The ultimate goal of the speech is not achieved, obama captures enough attention and makes himself well known nationwide though. By virtue of this, the speech succeeds. The paper aims to study the extracts from the angle of Thematic Structure, Pattern of Thematic Progression, cohesion and personal pronoun.

3. Analysis on the Extract of *The Audacity of Hope* from the Perspective of Thematic Structure and Thematic Progression

T stands for Theme, R stands for Rheme:
 (1) On behalf of the great state of Illinois, crossroads of a nation, land of Lincoln, let me(**T**) express my deep gratitude for the privilege of addressing this convention(**R**). Tonight(**T**) is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely(**R**). My father(**T**) was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya(**R**). He(**T**) grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack(**R**). His father, my grandfather(**T**), was a cook, a domestic servant(**R**).

Thematic Structure can be illustrated as:

On behalf of the great state of Illinois, crossroads of a nation, land of Lincoln, let me	express my deep gratitude for the privilege of addressing this convention
Tonight	is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely

My father	was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya
He	grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack
His father, my grandfather	was a cook, a domestic servant
Theme	Rheme

The format is as follows:

T1→R1

T2→R2

T3→R3

↓

T4 (=R3) →R4

T5→R5

This is the very beginning of the speech, from the formula we can see that T1 and T2 are the starting point to stress that Obama is going to be the representative to make a speech tonight. The third and the fourth clause are linked by Scalariform Mode. The fifth clause connects the first paragraph with the second one, paving the way for the next paragraph.

(2) That(**T**) is the true genius of America, a faith in the simple dreams of its people, the insistence on small miracles(**R**). That(**T**) we can tuck in our children at night and know they are fed and clothed and safe from harm(**R**). That(**T**) we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door(**R**). That(**T**) we can have an idea and start our own business without paying a bribe or hiring somebody's son(**R**). That(**T**) we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution, and that our votes will be counted - or at least, most of the time(**R**).

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That	is the true genius of America, a faith in the simple dreams of its people, the insistence
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That	we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution, and that our votes will be counted - or at least, most of the time
Theme	Rheme

The format is as follows:

$T1 \rightarrow R1$
 \downarrow
 $T2(=T1) \rightarrow R2$
 \downarrow
 $T3(=T2) \rightarrow R3$
 \downarrow
 $T4(=T3) \rightarrow R4$
 \downarrow
 $T5(=T4) \rightarrow R5$

Apparently, this whole paragraph adopts Radiative Mode to link up semantic meanings. The five “that” are repeatedly applied in order to call on people to pursue their freedom and rights. How can these rights be realized? In the last clause of this paragraph, “that” educes the topic of the speech, that is, as Obama mentions, to utilize political approach.

(3) In this election(**T**), we offer that choice(**R**). Our party has chosen a man to lead us (**T**)who embodies the best this country has to offer(**R**). That man(**T**) is John Kerry(**R**). John Kerry(**T**) understands the ideals of community, faith, and

sacrifice, because they've defined his life(**R**). From his heroic service in Vietnam to his years as prosecutor and lieutenant governor, through two decades in the United States Senate(**T**), he has devoted himself to this country(**R**). Again and again(**T**), we've seen him make tough choices when easier ones were available(**R**). His values and his record(**T**) affirm what is best in us(**R**).

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 \downarrow
 $T3(=R2) \rightarrow R3$
 \downarrow
 $T4(=R3) \rightarrow R4$
 $T5 \rightarrow R5$
 $T6 \rightarrow R6$

In the first clause, the Marked Theme “in this election” emphatically indicates that it is this election that provides a significant chance for American citizens to choose. Next, the second clause is elicited by Scalariform Mode to tell the audience what is the chance mentioned above. The mode between the third clause and the fourth clause is still Scalariform Mode. By using Marked Theme, Obama highlights Kerry’s contribution to deepen hearers’ impression that Kerry is the best person for the new president-elect in the following two clauses.

(4) John Kerry(**T**)believes in an America where hard work is rewarded(**R**). So instead of offering tax breaks to companies shipping jobs overseas(**T**), he'll offer them to companies creating jobs here at home(**R**). John Kerry(**T**) believes in an America where all Americans can afford the same health coverage our politicians in Washington have for themselves(**R**). John Kerry(**T**) believes in energy independence, so we aren't held hostage to the profits of oil companies or the sabotage of foreign oil fields(**R**). John Kerry(**T**)believes in the constitutional freedoms that have made our country the envy of the world, and he will never sacrifice our basic liberties nor use faith as a wedge to divide us(**R**). And John Kerry(**T**)believes that in a dangerous world, war must be an option, but it should never be the first option(**R**).

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So instead of offering tax breaks to companies shipping jobs overseas,	he 'll offer them to companies creating jobs here at home
John Kerry	believes in an America where all Americans can afford the same health coverage our

	politicians in Washington have for themselves
John Kerry	believes in energy independence, so we aren't held hostage to the profits of oil companies or the sabotage of foreign oil fields
John Kerry	believes in the constitutional freedoms that have made our country the envy of the world
and he	will never sacrifice our basic liberties nor use faith as a wedge to divide us
And John Kerry	believes that in a dangerous world, war must be an option
but it	should never be the first option
Theme	Rheme

The format is as follows:

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 $T2 (=T1) \rightarrow R2$
 \downarrow
 $T3 (=T2) \rightarrow R3$
 \downarrow
 $T4 (=T3) \rightarrow R4$
 \downarrow
 $T5 (=T4) \rightarrow R5$
 \downarrow
 $T6 (=T5) \rightarrow R6$
 \downarrow
 $T7 (=T6) \rightarrow R7$
 \downarrow
 $T8 (=R7) \rightarrow R8$

In the beginning of this paragraph, the Theme “John Kerry” is to indicate that the paragraph develops around this Theme. Afterwards, from the second clause to the seventh, Radiative Mode is exerted to link up the semantic meanings. The seventh clause connects with the eighth clause via Scalariform Mode and also a new topic is therefore coming up.

Obviously, this paragraph mostly selects Radiative Mode to stick out that John Kerry is the right person.

(5) Tonight, if you(T) feel the same energy I do, the same urgency I do, the same passion I do, the same hopefulness I do(R) - if we(T) do what we must do(R), then I(T) have no doubt that all across the country, from Florida to Oregon, from Washington to Maine(R), the people(T) will rise up in November(R), and John Kerry(T) will be sworn in as president(R), and John Edwards(T) will be sworn in as vice president(R), and this country(T) will reclaim its promise(R), and out of this long political darkness a brighter day(T) will come(R). Thank you(T) and God(T) bless you(R).

Thematic Structure can be illustrated as:

Tonight, if you	feel the same energy I do, the same urgency I do, the same passion I do, the same hopefulness I do
if we	do what we must do
then I	have no doubt that all across the country, from Florida to Oregon, from Washington to Maine
the people	will rise up in November
and John Kerry	will be sworn in as president
and John Edwards	will be sworn in as vice president
and this country	will reclaim its promise
and out of this long political darkness a brighter day	will come
Thank you	
and God	bless you
Theme	Rheme

The format is as follows:

T1→R1

T2→R2

T3→R3

T4→R4

T5→R5

T6→R6

T7→R7

T8→R8

T9→R9

T10→R10

This is the last paragraph of the speech, The whole paragraph is linked up by Coherence Breaks(Hu,2005). Namely, Coherence Breaks means the semantic meanings of developmental sequence are connected by new Theme. The last paragraph concisely makes clear of the thread of thoughts for the whole speech.

From these examples, the patterns of Thematic Progression adopted the most in this speech are Scalariform Mode and Radiative Mode. That these two Modes are constantly used in alternation makes the speech extend. Studying Patterns of Thematic Progression can conduce to help speakers to construct more effective discourse, and also help readers to better understand the implication of the discourse. Take the last paragraph as an example, the sequence of the Themes can be illustrated as: Tonight, if you→if we →then I → the people → John Kerry → and John Edwards → and this country → a brighter day → Thank → and God, we manage to get a rough picture of the speech. “Tonight, if you”, as the beginning of this paragraph, educes this special moment and the audience of the night. Later on, Obama attempts to attract the hearers who share the same belief with the democrats to join them by using “we”. “then I” is used to explain that if we can make joint efforts to make the American dream come true, Obama can make himself believe that not the democrats alone will join them. “the people” therefore, will vote for Kerry and Edwards. Follow-

The wording of the speech is succinct but it summarizes the whole speech and also emphasizes the main topic of it. Through progressing the themes, the hearers are strongly impacted. They are unconsciously affected by Obama's talk and therewith identify the political concept of the Democratic Party.

4. The Characteristics of Personal Pronouns in *The Audacity of Hope*

Statistics of the personal pronouns:

Through the statistics above, within this speech, first person accounts for 63% of the total amount of personal pronouns. The first person is the most used personal pronoun in the speech. In order to get

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semantic meanings with “so” and “instead of”. In the very last clause, “they” is used to refer to the preceding “these enemies”, “his” and “him” refer to “John Kerry”, and “and” is used to connect semantic meanings.

The speech quite effectively avoids procrastination by using reference and conjunction, still the main idea of the speech is conveyed at the same time.

6. Conclusion

We roughly get insight into the semantic meanings of the speech and the ways that the speaker organizes clauses through analyzing the extracts of *The Audacity of Hope* from the perspectives of Thematic Structure, Patterns of Thematic Progression, personal pronoun and cohesive devices. Through analyzing the speech, we comprehend the purpose of the speaker and how the speech unfolds all the better. From these extracts, we can come to a conclusion that the most used patterns of Thematic Progression are Scalariform Mode and Radiative Mode. Speech’s semantic meanings are connected by alternatively using these two patterns. Via the first person, Obama makes efforts to get closer to the audience and win their votes. Resort to cohesive devices, such as reference and conjunction, etc. the speech flows naturally. All these contribute to Obama’s success on the speech and earn substantial critical acclaim for him. However, these analytical methods are far from enough to thoroughly analyze one discourse. Still, many other analytical methods are worthy of investigation in the future.

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