

# An Analysis of Taylor Swift's 2022 NYU Commencement Speech from the Perspective of System Functional Grammar

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## Abstract:

Based on the theory of system functional grammar, this article takes Taylor Swift's commencement speech as a corpus, and analyzes the text from three perspectives as transitivity, modality and discourse with an aim to expose the discourse characteristics of her speech and the deep meanings. There are some findings as follows: 1) Taylor Swift mostly uses material and mental processes to show her life experience to the audience and provides some suggestions. 2) Taylor Swift makes use of the first person pronouns and the medium value modal verbs to represent her friendliness and attitude. 3) Taylor Swift adopts the constant theme and liner theme progression to enhance the continuity of the speech language. In brief, her speech is presented with an equal attitude, and it is always sincere, inspiring and full of hope.

**Keywords** —System Functional Grammar, Taylor Swift, Commencement Speech-----

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## I. INTRODUCTION

System functional grammar focuses on the way language operates, that is, how different parts of the language are combined to achieve meaningful communication, and how language operates as a means of communication in society. This theory has greatly deepened people's understanding of language and has strong practicality.

Taylor Swift, a most popular singer and now a doctoral student in New York University, whose personal experience is toughing and inspiring, rarely gives formal speeches. When she did it, its effect is highly approved and appraised.

By using the theory of system functional grammar, this article is trying to find out the purpose and significance of Taylor Swift's speech by interpreting how she uses language, establishes connections with the audience, expresses her own ideas, and resonates with the audience.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Foreign Research

Since its construction by British linguist Halliday in the late 1950s to the early 1960s, system

functional grammar has quickly become a guiding theory for scholars to explore the language and identity of anti racism and anti colonialism. This thesis studies the system functional grammar by analyzing Taylor Swift's speech. So this part is mainly about the use of this theory model in speech.

Foreign scholars tend to focus on speeches made by political figures. Nasution, A. (2018) analyzes Vladimir Putin's speech at Fifa World Cup 2018 in Moscow, Suryadewi, N. K. I., Netra, I. M. and Rajeg, I. M. (2018) take John Kerry and Ban Ki-moon's Speech as an example, Ekpang, J. N. and Godwin, O. C. (2020) make an analysis of Honourable Patrick Obahiagbon's speech. These scholars use system functional grammar as a theoretical guide to analyze how speakers achieve their speech goals, effectiveness, and what are the functions of their speeches.

### B. Domestic Research

After system functional linguistics is raised, Chinese scholars led by Hu Zhuanglin have introduced this theory into China and conducts in-depth exploration and research. China has also made its own development in the field of system functional linguistics. The studies on speeches

conducted by Chinese scholars using systemic functional grammar are as follows.

Through searching on China National Knowledge Infrastructure, it is found that there have been over thirty conferences on system functional grammar in China from 2001 to 2022. The focus of these meetings is on the application of system functional grammar in English teaching, English translation, discourse analysis and speech.

Among these conferences, domestic scholars often take foreigners' speeches as their research objects, especially those of foreign presidents. Zheng Jianping (2006) takes Bush Weekly TV Lecture as an example, Pei Zhenxia (2008) takes Barack Hussein Obama's Victory Speech as an example, and Chen Lu (2022) makes an analysis of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin's political speech. All of them use system functional grammar to analyze the certain speech, and they find that the transitivity system, mood, modality, theme and rhyme involved in the speech are all aimed at disseminating information in an effective way.

In master's and doctoral theses, speeches by domestic and foreign leaders and well-known figures are commonly used for analysis. Wang Jing (2015) takes the inauguration speeches of Obama and Bush as an example. Chen Hong (2018) does the similar research, but her research object is Donald Trump's Inaugural speech. Du Zenghui (2020) takes the New Year's greetings of Chinese as an example. Huang Longchuan(2016) takes Bill Gates' graduation speech at Stanford as an example.

In summary, scholars both home and abroad have analyzed the speeches of public figures from a system functional grammar perspective, but few have analyzed the speeches of well-known singers, even if they have profound influence among young people.

### **III. THEORETICAL BASIS**

Functional grammar is one of the parts of system functional grammar. It elucidates the three major functions of language, namely ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function, which are respectively related to the transitivity system, mood system, and theme system. Then I will introduce these three functions respectively.

#### **A. Ideational Function**

Ideational function refers to the reflection of language on the external and internal world, which is often referred to as "content". And this function is usually realized by transitivity system, which interprets the world of human experience as a set of controllable processes. Halliday holds that this controllable processes includes six types: material processes, mental processes, behavioral processes, relational processes, verbal processes, and existential processes. In Taylor Swift's speech, three of these six processes are discovered, so here I only introduce these three processes in detail.

Material process is a process of material doing. It expresses the notion that some entity physically does something—which may be done to some other entity. The participants in this process bring about the unfolding of the process through time, leading to an outcome that is different from the initial phase of the unfolding.

Mental process is about sensing: feeling, thinking, perceiving. This process is covert kinds of going-on. And the participants involved in mental process is not so much acting or acting upon in a doing sense.

Relational process is a process of being and having. This process is typically about the verb "be" or some verb of the same class, for instance, "become", "seem", "appear" or "have" and "posses".

#### **B. Interpersonal Function**

The interpersonal function embodies all uses of language to express social and personal relations. This includes various ways that the speaker enters a speech situation and performs a speech act. This function is mainly realized by mood and modality system.

Mood refers to what role the speaker has chosen and what role he has assigned to the addressee. It includes two parts: the subject and finite. The subject is implemented by nominal words, and the finite element is realized by a verb.

In terms of modality, it means the speaker's judgment or the probabilities of her prediction. It is mainly about the uncertain expression of usability, inclination, and obligation.

### **C. Textual Function**

The textual function refers to the fact that language has mechanisms to make any stretch of spoken or written discourse into a coherent and unified text and make a living passage different from a random list of sentences. This function is reflected through thematic structure which consists of theme and rheme.

## **IV. AN ANALYSIS OF TAYLOR SWIFT'S 2022 NYU COMMENCEMENT SPEECH**

This part concerns Taylor's commencement speech and concisely presents three major meta-functions of her speech, namely transitivity, modality and textual analysis.

### **A. Analysis of transitivity**

Grammatically, the expression using "goings-on" has the power of acting, giving and demanding goods-services and information, reflecting, imposing order on the endless variation and flow of events. The grammar system that implements this is transitivity. In Taylor's speech, she uses several material processes, relational processes and mental processes in transitivity to represent her experience and thoughts. In the following content, I analyze the three processes involved in Taylor's speech.

1) **Material Process:** The material process is the process of doing something, which mainly includes the actor of the action and the process of the action as well as the goal of the action. The actor and the goal of the action are usually nouns and pronouns, and the process of action is a dynamic verb that represents the course of action.

Example 1: I will, however, give you some life hacks I wish I knew when I was starting out my dreams of career, and navigating life, love, pressure, choices, shame, hope and friendship.

In the first example, "I" is the actor of the action described by the process "give". "Some life hacks" is the goal. Here, what Taylor conveys to everyone is a message, not a concrete object. She uses a series of nouns to share her own experience, and then to give everyone some suggestions, and the credibility of these suggestions is very high because personal experience is more convincing than talking

about others' experience at most of time and what Taylor said is something that everyone cannot avoid or definitely will encounter in life.

Example 2: Not being invited to the parties and sleepovers in my hometown made me feel hopelessly, but because I felt alone, I would sit in my room and write the songs that would get me a ticket somewhere else.

In the latter half of the second example, the actor is "I", the verb is "write", and the goal is "songs". But it is worth noting that there is also a mental process before this material process occurs, which is that "I feel alone". And the senser in the mental process is the same as the actor in the material process. Through the connection between these two processes, Taylor takes a good personal experience as an example and tells everyone to focus on and believe in themselves. More importantly, she is trying to pass on the positive and appropriate way to inspire the audience to pick themselves up when they are feeling depressed.

2) **Relational Process:** Relational process refers to a process of being. This process can be divided into two types, they are attributive process and identifying process. The former one assigns a quality, and the two participants are carrier and attribute. The latter one establishes an identity, and the two participants are token and value. What's more, the two categorizations are made up of three sorts which are intensive, circumstantial and possessive.

Example 1: I had a phase where, for the entity of 2012, I dressed like a 1950s housewife. But you know what? I was having fun.

In the first example, there are two possessive processes. Both the possessor is "I", and the two possessed things are "phase" and "fun". From this example, we can see that at different stages of life, Taylor has been misunderstood or even ridiculed by others, but she still perseveres herself and enjoys her life. She also takes this opportunity to tell everyone that as long as we are happy, nothing is impossible.

Example 2: I'd like to thank NYU for making me technically, on paper at least, a doctor. Not the type

of doctor you would want around in the case of an emergency.

In the second example, there is an attributive process. The carrier is “me” and the attribute is “doctor”. At the beginning of the speech, Taylor expresses her doctoral graduate status. She uses the polysemy of the word ‘doctor’ to express in an extremely humorous manner which type of doctor she is. This narrows the distance with the audience and also alleviates the tension during the speech. We can know that Taylor is not a towering star, but an ordinary student like most people.

3) *Mental Process*: Mental process is described as states of mind or psychological events instead of material action. Besides, this sort of process is almost realized by the use of verbs, such as “think”, “notice”, “admire”, “love” and so forth. And the subject in the mental process is named as the senser, and the event one perceives is named as the phenomenon.

Example 1: And as I would like to say to you, you should be very proud of what you’ve done with it.

Example 2: I hope you know how proud I am to share this day with you. We are doing together.

In the first example, the senser is “the audience”, and the phenomenon is “what the audience has done”. In the second example, the senser is “I”, and the phenomenon is “share this day with the audience”. The verbs in both examples are “proud”. However, the two examples express different things. In the first example, Taylor stands from the same perspective as the audience, calling on everyone to be proud of what they have and achieved. In the second example, she expresses her feelings as a speaker and would be proud to have shared her experience with everyone. Both of these examples demonstrate that Taylor is a confident and powerful person with a gentle personality and successfully stirs up everyone's emotions with upward attitude.

### ***B. Analysis of mood and modality***

Language also has the function of expressing speaker’s identity, status, attitude, motivation as well as speaker’s judgment and evaluation towards things. This is interpersonal function which is

realized by mood and modality. And the following part is about the analysis of mood and modality in Taylor’s speech.

1) *Mood*: Mood is a system involving the choices of declarative, interrogative, imperative and relating to the interaction of subject and finite in the clause.

Example 1: I hope you’ll find your own way to express your gratitude for all the steps and missteps that have led us to this common destination.

Example 2: Let me say to you now: Welcome to New York. It’s been waiting for you.

These two examples are both imperative mood. Taylor has chosen the role for herself of someone who can speak on behalf of all 2022 graduates, while the role chosen for addressee is the listener. Setting such roles at the beginning of a speech lays the foundation for the entire speech, expressing gratitude to everyone and correcting the listener's attitude.

2) *Modality*: Modality is the way in which the meaning of a proposition is modified as to reflect the speaker’s attitude towards the likelihood of the proposition content being or becoming true. And the modal auxiliary verb is used to achieve its function. It partially reflects the attitude, viewpoint and judgment of the speaker. The low value modal auxiliary verbs (can, could) focus on the retention attitude held by the speaker, and the medium value modal auxiliary verbs (will, should) are used to express probability, willingness obligation, and the high value modal auxiliary verbs (must, can’t) are used to strengthen speaker’s personal authority and influence public actions deeply.

Example 1: Maybe they aren’t with us anymore, and in that case I hope you’ll remember them today.

Example 2: And I’m not gonna lie, these mistakes will cause you to lose things.

Example 3: But I really can’t complain about not having a normal college experience to you because you went to NYU during a global pandemic, being essentially locked into your dorms or having classes over Zoom.

In Taylor's speech, she mostly uses the medium value modal auxiliary verbs. In the first example, using “maybe” to represent uncertainty, Taylor

cannot determine whether the person who helps the audience is still by their side. In the second example, Taylor uses the medium value modal auxiliary verb to reveal some cruel facts to everyone. Her speech is not just about raising everyone's expectations for the future or promoting the beauty of free life, but also telling everyone about the hardships that may be encountered in the future. In the third example, using the high value modal auxiliary verb strongly indicates that one's past bad experiences are not worth mentioning, as everyone has had unpleasant experiences, but they all have successfully come to this point.

### **C. Analysis of thematic progression**

In a certain context, there are many clauses and each of them has its own thematic structure. But there are some connections between the theme and rheme in different clauses, such connections are called progression. As the theme of each clause moves forward, the text gradually expresses a complete meaning. In Taylor's speech, she mainly uses constant theme pattern and linear theme patterns.

1) **Constant theme pattern:**The constant theme pattern means that every sentence shares the same theme and different rheme.

Example 1: Everything I do is just an extension of my writing. Everything is connected by my love of the craft.

Example 2: As a songwriter, I've never been able to sit still, or stay in one creative place for too long. I've made and released 11 albums and in the process, I've switched genres from country to top to alternative to folk.

The two sentences in the first example have the same theme of "everything", but different rheme. The rheme in the first sentence of example 1 is "an extension of my writing". In the second example, the theme "I" has been repeated three times, but the rheme of these sentences are totally different from each other. the rheme in the second sentence of example 2 is "by my love of the craft". As a creative singer, Taylor tells everyone through her experience of creating music that people should dare to try and focus wholeheartedly on what they

are doing. Using the constant theme pattern, the sentence structure is compact, not only emphasizing Taylor's personal experience, but also serving as a call for action.

2) **Linear theme pattern:**The linear theme pattern means the rheme or one part of the theme in the former sentence becomes the theme for the next sentence.

Example 1: It seems to me that there is a false stigma around eagerness in our culture of "unbothered ambivalence". This outlook perpetuates the idea that it's not cool to "want it".

Example 2: It has been the compass guiding my life. And in turn, my life guided my writing.

In the first example, the rheme "a false stigma" in the first half of the sentence becomes the theme in the second half of the sentence, and "this outlook" is used instead. In the second example, the rheme "my life" in the first half of the sentence becomes the theme in the second half, and a new rheme appears in the second half of the sentence. The linear theme pattern strengthens the connection between sentences. This pattern also demonstrates the connection between sentences and meanings, reflecting the logic of Taylor's speech, as well as her personal insights and understanding of life.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Through analysis, we find that Taylor Swift uses different language styles when discussing different themes. The language she uses, including tense, person, and the way she arranges her language, all reflect that she is a gentle and egalitarian person. The purpose of her speech is to be a person who has had the experience, to be in an equal position with everyone, and to tell everyone in an extremely friendly manner that they should be proud of what they have, and should have confidence in the beauty and hardships they will experience in the future.

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