

# An Analysis of College English Discourse Based on Systemic Functional Grammar

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**Abstract:** Halliday's systemic functional grammar provides theoretical basis for discourse analysis, which reveals the conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function of language through the analysis of the transitivity system, mood system, modality system and thematic structure. This paper attempts to explore the application value of systemic functional grammar in language teaching based on the theoretical basis of these three functions and the text samples of the full edition of advanced college English textbooks to provide guidance for the design of college English teaching syllabus, teachers' classroom role positioning and students' learning methods.

**Key words:** Systemic Functional Grammar; College English ; Discourse

## 1. Theoretical Basis

Halliday divides the pure function of language into conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function.

Conceptual function is used to convey new information to the listener, and it reflects the things happening in the objective and subjective world, the people involved and the time and place related to them, including transitive inquiry, voice and modal inquiry. In the transitivity exploration, there are mainly six processes: material processes, mental processes, behavioral processes, verbal processes, relational processes and existential processes; transitivity analysis consists of three components participants and circumstances involved in the process. From these three variables form six kinds of processes: A material process is the process of doing something, usually embodied by action verbs: throw, go, stand, scratch and so on. Mental process refers to non-action processes such as "emotion", "cognition" and "feeling", indicating the development and change of people's inner world. Common verbs include: like, hear, know, understand, etc. A verbal process is the process in which people communicate information through speech, often with verbs such as say, speak, answer, etc; A relational process reflects the relation of an object to another, commonly used verbs include be, become, represent, own, etc; A existential process indicates the process by which something or someone exists, often used in descriptions of scenes or travelogues; A behavioral process refers to physiological processes such as crying, dreaming, breathing, sighing, coughing and so on.

Interpersonal function analyzes how people express their views through language and establish interpersonal relationship from the perspective of modality, mainly reflected by mood and modality. Mood is the type of clause selected for need, including three basic mood, statement, imperative and question. The declarative mood is used to state facts and convey information; The interrogative mood is used to express doubt; The imperative expresses an order, request, etc. Modality is an expression of the speaker's attitude and judgment about what is being said.

Discourse function refers to how people transmit and organize linguistic information through thematic structure, information structure and cohesive devices. The thematic structure model shows how a discourse reflects the deep meaning of a discourse. Cohesion, as the sole source of discourse organization, refers to the semantic relationship between sentences in a text, which is realized by grammar, vocabulary and connectives.

## 2. Discourse Analysis

Based on the above theoretical basis, this paper mainly selects the article How my Chinese Mother-in-Law replaces My Husband in the Reading part of the new version of Advanced College English Unit3 for discourse analysis.

### 2.1 Cultural Context

Cultural context is the source of discourse, and the analysis of cultural knowledge background is the basis of discourse analysis. In order to better enable students to have a deep cognition of the discourse, firstly, the genre of the selected discourse should be analyzed. The text is a narrative text, whose cultural context is the cultural differences between Chinese and Westerners in family, travel, workplace and other aspects. It is only by understanding the different views of Chinese and Westerners on things that we can have a direct perception to the central theme conveyed in the text. When the author mentioned "Gender equity is a hard issue to work out in China generally, but now with a baby, any hope I had for balance". In combination with the cultural background, students will quickly understand why the author thinks it is more difficult to pursue gender equality in family life after having children.

### 2.2 Situational Context

The analysis of situation context mainly focuses on three aspects: field, mode, and tenor. The concrete analysis are as below. Field: The author's family life after the birth of her daughter; Mode: The author is Canadian, and the social distance from the audience is not far. Tenor: formal written English.

### 2.3 Transitivity Analysis

The main basic point of conceptual function is the transitivity of verbs. Through the analysis of transitivity, we find that different processes in the discourse occur in the following table:

Transitivity	Material processes	Relational processes	verbal processes	Existential processes	Mental processes	behavioral processes
No.	37	14	9	9	7	6
Frequency	45.1%	17.07%	10.97%	10.97%	8.5%	7.3%

The figure above shows that material process takes the largest proportion in the whole discourse. The discourse is based on the different cultural backgrounds of China and Canada, and the author discusses the differences between Chinese and Western parenting concepts. Through some specific examples, the author mainly discusses how her Chinese mother-in-law gradually replaced her husband's father role after the birth of her child.

Material process is reflected by action verbs. This article mainly uses the following verbs to reflect the process of events. Part of the text is as follows:

When my daughter was born, my mother-in-law left her hometown and moved to Beijing, separated from her husband for the first time in their 35-year marriage. She left .....A new generation is that important. Her role is clear. She has to be here.....

"left, moved, separated" were mainly used to indicate that after the author's daughter was born, her mother-in-law devoted herself to taking care of her granddaughter at the expense of her own life in order to raise the third generation of children. All these verbs profoundly describe the status quo of a Chinese family. Once a new generation is born in the family, the older generation will face changes in their lifestyle that are taken for granted in traditional Chinese family thinking. Westerners think that having children is their own business and has little to do with other people. The use of these three verbs vividly depicts the view of parenting in Chinese families: after a child is born, grandparents will change their way of life for this reason, and it is considered their duty to take care of their grandchildren.

The description of relational process is mainly used to describe the relationship between things. In Halliday's opinion, relational process describes the attitude and viewpoint of the speaker. In this article, the sentences of relationship process are mainly used to describe the organizational relationship and changes of the characters.

"was born, is that, is clear" is used in the first sentence and last three sentences of the extracted text to indicate the birth of the daughter. The emergence of new family members has changed the life responsibilities of the mother-in-law, which also suggests that the author expressed surprise and even confusion about the sacrifices her mother-in-law has made for the family, and further reflects the cultural differences between China and the West.

When I would push him to do more for the baby and as a parent, his answer was most commonly: "Get my mother to help you!" To which I'd respond..... she expressed to me that perhaps I don't understand this aspect of Chinese culture. Her role here, she explained, was to replace her son in the equation .....

The verbal process is mainly reflected by above verbs. In the text, the author could not understand the husband's behavior when he returned home to ignore the children. In the discussion and dispute between the two, it further reflected that the two represented the collision of two ideas, in fact, it was a cultural conflict.

In mental process, words like "think, felt, expected" are used to describe the author's understanding of a series of emotional changes in the process of mother-in-law replacing her husband's role to take care of the child, from shock to final understanding but not completely acceptance.

#### 2.4 Mood and Modality Analysis

Most of the sentences at the beginning of the first paragraph of the article are composed of declarative sentences, which are mainly to introduce the theme and let the readers know the characters of the article and the things they have experienced and discussed. At the end of the article, the author uses exclamatory sentences to express his feelings and sighs about the different parenting concepts in China and the West. The purpose of the whole article is to tell readers that although different concepts and cultures will cause a lot of collisions in people's life, as long as we continue to adjust on the basis of respecting cultural habits, we can certainly achieve a balance in the conflicts and collisions.

Modality system is used to express interpersonal functions. When using language to regulate inter-relationship, due to the diversity of social activities and the complexity of interpersonal relationship, we sometimes need to give or obtain information directly in verbal communication, but sometimes we need to use indirect and indirect language to blur our attitudes or opinions. These aspects relate to the problem of modality. The following sentence in the text: when would I be presented with a bill? How could I ever repay this kindness? our daughter should be half his responsibility. "would" shows that the author is worried about the mother-in-law taking care of their children now, and that they will have to pay for it in the future. It deeply reflects the idea of independence and equality between men and women in China and the West. The author is not sure when to pay the bill. "Could" is a euphemism for "can", which shows the author is not sure how she can repay her mother-in-law for her help. "should" means duty and responsibility. It emphasizes that a husband should assume his own responsibility and obligation in the process of raising a daughter.

#### 2.5 Thematic Structure and Cohesion Analysis

Thematic structure is divided into marked thematic structure and unmarked thematic structure. The first sentence in the first paragraph: I sat around a table of couples in my husband's hometown this spring. Using the marked theme structure to introduce the character "I" directly, and gave the background and location of the event. And both are subject clauses as thematic. According to Halliday, the function of marked theme is to provide background. "What makes our journey unique," Using subject clause to emphasize the uniqueness of the author's family life, comparing life to travel, can better reflect the change of the author's family life pattern. "unique" implies the author's inadaptation

to such a unique change. “35-year marriage”, “the first time” and “25 years from now” emphasize and the great sacrifice made by the older generation in the traditional Chinese thought after the birth of the new generation. The reward of this “selfless dedication” is that the younger generation should also be so selfless to take care of the elder parents.

Cohesion is divided into grammatical and lexical cohesion. From the perspective of grammatical cohesion, the text uses reference, connection and substitution. Reference is divided into internal and external reference, and the internal reference is divided into Cataphoric and Anaphoric. In the sentence “Her grandmother keeps it all in balance by being a type of third parent”, “it” refers to the mother-in-law as a third parent, emphasizing that it is the mother-in-law’s participation that maintains the balance of the family; “It’s been a wobbly triangle” “it” refers to the family relationship mentioned above. In addition to reference, the realization of sentence connection in discourse mainly relies on the use of words such as “and, after, but” to achieve logical function. By means of thematic results and cohesion analysis, we can accurately master the text frame structure, grasp the semantic relations between sentences, and understand the overall coherence of the text. In view of this, if English teachers master some knowledge of thematic structure analysis and can apply it to teaching, then in teaching, the explanation of articles can be better from the large number of manpower, break the traditional teaching only grasp the words, regardless of the overall shortcomings, which is bound to have an obvious guiding effect on English teaching. Teachers need to spend more time understanding and sorting out the text requirements before preparing the lesson.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper makes a preliminary study of discourse in college English teaching based on Halliday’s systemic-functional grammar. From the above analysis, it can be seen that the transitivity structure can reflect the overall content characteristics of the discourse. Therefore, through discourse structure analysis, we can accurately judge the discourse and further understand the various meanings. Both foreign language teachers and foreign language learners should make more use of linguistic functional analysis to understand discourse in the process of teaching and learning.

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