

# Functional Discourse Analysis of Queen Elizabeth II's Speech in 2020

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**Abstract:** Based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, this thesis analyzes Elizabeth II's 2020 Christmas speech and studies how the Queen uses language skills to obtain the support of the audience. Through the method of functional discourse analysis, this paper explores the performance of the three metafunctions of language in discourse. A comprehensive and in-depth analysis of Christmas speeches shows the operability and applicability of systemic functional linguistics theory in explaining political discourse, which is of practical significance. In addition, representative and contemporary political discourses are selected, and the analysis results are more practical.

**Keywords:** Systemic Functional Grammar; Christmas speech; Metafunction; Discourse Analysis.

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## 1. Introduction

Language, as the main tool for human beings to exchange ideas and emotions, carries rich cultural and social information. Systemic functional linguistics, as an important branch of linguistics, not only focuses on the form and structure of language, but also emphasizes the function and use of language in social and cultural contexts. By using the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics, we can deeply analyze the linguistic features and functions of specific discourses, so as to reveal the social and cultural significance and ideology behind them.

The Queen's Christmas speech is a traditional event with profound historical and cultural heritage. At this time of year, the Queen will address the nation through television, review the major events of the past year, and express her concern for the country and her blessings to the people. This activity not only strengthens the connection between the royal family and the people, but also conveys the core values and cultural spirit of Britain. In 2020, the world has experienced an unprecedented challenge of a novel coronavirus pandemic, which has had a profound impact on the world. In this context, the Queen's Christmas speech is particularly special and eye-catching. The Queen conveyed her concern for the country, comfort for the people and hope for the future with her characteristic gentle and firm tone. Her words not only contain praise for the resilience of people under the epidemic, but also show good expectations for future life.

Systemic Functional Linguistics believes that the use of language is restricted and influenced by specific social and cultural contexts. Therefore, this paper will make an in-depth analysis of the discourse of the Queen's Christmas Speech in 2020 from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics. We will focus on the language elements such as vocabulary, sentence pattern and tone used by the Queen in her speech, and analyze how these elements realize their functions in a specific social and cultural context. At the same time, we will also explore the British social and cultural values and ideologies reflected behind these linguistic elements.

Through the discourse analysis of the 2020 Queen's Christmas speech, we can better understand the Queen's role in this special period and how she conveys her emotions and thoughts through language. In addition, this study also helps

us to further understand the theoretical value and application prospect of systemic functional linguistics, and provides useful reference for future related research and practice.

To sum up, this thesis aims to make a detailed and in-depth analysis of the discourse of the Queen's Christmas Speech in 2020 by using the theoretical framework and methodology of Systemic Functional Linguistics, so as to reveal its linguistic features, functional realization and socio-cultural significance. We believe that this study will not only help deepen our understanding of systemic functional linguistics, but also provide new perspectives and ideas for us to better understand British social and cultural values.

## 2. Functional Discourse Analysis

The establishment of systemic functional discourse analysis theory originated from the academic thought of Firth, the founder of the London School. Firth was deeply influenced by the anthropologist Malinowski, who put forward the concept of situational context and cultural context, emphasizing the close relationship between language and social and cultural environment. Firth's student Halliday inherited and developed Firth's theory, perfected it into systemic grammar, and emphasized the organizational structure and function of language. In 1968, Halliday added a functional part to Systemic Grammar, forming Systemic Functional Linguistics. This theory combines functional analysis with structural analysis of language, emphasizing the sociality and contextuality of language use. With the continuous development of systemic functional linguistics, the theory of systemic functional discourse analysis has been gradually formed and improved. The theory emphasizes the comprehensive analysis of the use of language in a specific context to reveal the function and role of language in communication. It not only pays attention to the internal structure and rules of language, but also pays attention to the relationship between language and the external world, as well as the use of language in the context of social culture. Halliday holds the views that language have three metafunctions:

Ideational Metafunction refers to that language is used to express people's experience and views of the real world, describe things, events and states, and reflect the objective

world and subjective thinking.

Interpersonal Metafunction refers to that language is used to establish and maintain social relations, express attitudes and emotions, influence the behavior of others, and achieve communicative interaction. ( Hu Zhuanglin, 2005 : 116 )

Textual Metafunction refers to that language is used to organize information, combine language components into a coherent text, and ensure the effective transmission of information in communication.

Based on the current state of research, the author takes different classes of people's dialogue in *Dream of Red Mansions* as a research object. This paper will use speech act theory of J·L·Austin and J·R·Searle to analyze different kind of characters in the novel and deep meaning of the work more deeply, thus combine the research of linguistic and literature.

### 3. Text Analysis

Halliday's functional linguistics provides us with a new perspective to understand and analyze the function and role of language. It emphasizes the sociality and communication of language and reveals the important position and value of language in human social life. Next part will analyze the Queen's speech from the perspective of functional discourse analysis.

#### 3.1. Transitivity Analysis of Ideational Metafunction

Ideational Meta-function, as a core of Systemic Functional Linguistics, its essence is to explore how language maps the external world and people's inner experiences and feelings. In short, it explores how language becomes a tool for us to express our cognition and understanding of the world. This covers many aspects, such as the description of objects, the narration of events, and the elaboration of views. It can be said that it is with ideational Meta-function let people understand and use language more deeply and accurately.

##### 3.1.1. Material Process

In the given discourse, the material processes are those that involve physical actions or transformations. These processes describe how entities interact with each other or with their environment, often focusing on the dynamic aspects of the narrative. They are utilized to convey actions and events related to Christmas celebrations, festivals, and the impact of the current year's challenges. Next part will analyze the material process clauses in detail:

*E.g. Every year we herald the coming of Christmas by turning on the lights.*

In this sentence, The verb "herald" (to proclaim or announce) reveals the material process of the sentence. The actor is "we", means the speaker Elizabeth II and their community, the goal means "the coming of Christmas" (the arrival or celebration of Christmas). The action of switching on lights as a symbolic gesture describes a yearly tradition whereby the speaker's community announces the approach of Christmas by physically turning on lights. Inner meaning: This sentence initiates the discourse by establishing a traditional activity—turning on lights—as a way to celebrate the advent of Christmas. The material process "herald" suggests the act of announce or marking the beginning of an event, while "turning on the lights" is the specific action through which this celebration is achieved. It sets the tone for the discourse, introducing the theme of light and its association with celebration and hope.

*E.g....Last month, fireworks lit up the sky around Windsor...*

Here, the fireworks are the implicit actor responsible for the illumination of the sky in the Windsor area, creating a visible display. This clause describes a specific action—the firing of fireworks or lit up (to illuminate or brighten)—that created a visual display. It represents a joyful celebration despite social distancing measures. The clause contrasts with the previous mention of people being unable to gather as they would wish, showing how people still find ways to celebrate and bring joy to their communities.

*E.g....Florence Nightingale shone a lamp of hope across the world.*

In this sentence, The verb shone (to emit light) reveals the material process of the sentence. The actor is "Florence Nightingale" while the goal means "a lamp of hope"(the arrival or celebration of Christmas).

This clause depicts Florence Nightingale as the figure who emitted or symbolically spread a lamp of hope globally, personifying Florence Nightingale and comparing her actions and influence to the shining of a lamp. Not only symbolize the hope she brought to the world through her nursing work, but also serves as an example of how individuals can bring hope and comfort in difficult times, foreshadowing the mention of front-line services later in the discourse.

*E.g. Our front-line services still shine that lamp for us.*

In this example, "shine" shows the material process. The actor is "Our front-line services" while the goal refers to "that lamp (of hope)". This clause speaks to the continued efforts of front-line services in emitting or maintaining that same lamp of hope for society. It compares the work of front-line services to the shining of a lamp, emphasizing their crucial role in providing hope and support during the current challenging times. For the whole passage, it builds on the previous mention of Florence Nightingale, drawing a parallel between her work and the work of front-line services today. It also ties into the overall theme of hope and resilience in the face of adversity.

In each of these material process clauses, there is a clear actor performing an action on a goal or recipient. These actions are physical in nature, involving lighting up, shining, and heralding, which contribute to the narrative's overall theme of hope and celebration in spite of challenging times. The analysis follows a logical format, identifying the process, actor, goal, and any additional circumstantial elements that contribute to the meaning of the clause. Throughout the discourse, the material process clauses are used to convey actions that are not only physical but also symbolic, carrying deeper meanings related to celebration, hope, and the resilience of individuals and communities. The clauses work together to create a coherent narrative that explores how people find ways to celebrate and bring hope to each other despite the challenges of the year.

##### 3.1.2. Relational Process

The text presents a series of relational processes that connect various entities and concepts, expressing their interdependencies and significance. Relational processes are those that establish relationships between two separate entities, either as attributes or identifications. In the given text, these processes are particularly evident in the way they connect Christmas, light, hope, and the actions and experiences of people during the pandemic.

*E.g. For Christians, Jesus is the light of the world.*

This is an instance of relational process, where Jesus is attributed the status of "the light of the world," emphasizing

his role as a guiding force in Christian belief.

For Christians, Jesus is “the light of the world”, but we can’t celebrate his birth today in quite the usual way. “Jesus is “the light of the world”. This is a declarative statement that establishes Jesus as a symbol of light and hope. This sentence introduces a religious aspect, emphasizing Jesus as the symbol of light but also acknowledging the impossibility of celebrating his birth in the usual manner due to the current situation. Through these relational processes, the text builds a coherent narrative that connects the physical act of turning on lights with deeper themes of hope, resilience, and community spirit. It highlights the significance of light as a symbol of hope not only during Christmas but also throughout the year, particularly in the context of the pandemic and the efforts of front-line workers and communities to overcome adversity.

### 3.1.3. Mental Process

*E.g. Across the Commonwealth, my family and I have been inspired by stories of people volunteering in their communities, helping those in need.*

The verb “have been inspired” describes a mental state and establishes a relationship between the subject “my family and I” and the object “stories of people volunteering”. This sentence showcases the positive impact of volunteering and community spirit, inspiring the speaker and their family.

In the United Kingdom and around the world, people have risen magnificently to the challenges of the year, and I am so proud and moved by this quiet, indomitable spirit.

*E.g. We continue to be inspired by the kindness of strangers and draw comfort that- even on the darkest nights -there is hope in the new dawn."*

Here, the mental process is one of attribution, where the hope present in the new dawn is attributed as a source of comfort, even during the “darkest nights”. This expresses a profound optimism about the future, despite the challenges of the present.

### 3.1.4. Verbal Process

Functional grammar theory emphasizes the role of language in conveying experiences, events, and states, with the verbal process serving as a crucial means to express these functions.

In her speech, the Queen employs the verbal process effectively, as evident in the following excerpt:

*E.g. I am speaking to you at the start of a New Year, as your Queen, and as a grandmother. I have, like you, reflected on the year gone by, and on the future.*

The verb “speaking” initiates the discourse, setting the tone and framework for the communication. By identifying herself not only as the Queen but also as a grandmother, the Queen establishes a personal and intimate connection with her audience. Her mention of shared experiences, reflecting on the past year and anticipating the future, further enhances this connection, making the speech more relatable and engaging.

*E.g. I pay tribute to the countless men and women who have selflessly dedicated themselves to the fight against the virus.*

The Queen utilizes the verbal process to express her admiration for frontline workers and her aspirations for the country. The verbs “pay tribute to” and “dedicated themselves to” form a powerful verbal process that not only honors the bravery and dedication of frontline workers but also underscores their crucial role in the fight against the pandemic.

### 3.1.5. Existential Process

Queen Elizabeth II, through the utilization of the Existential Process within the Ideational Meta-function of

Functional Grammar, objectively and directly presents the societal realities and the spirit of the people amidst the pandemic in her 2020 Christmas message. By emphasizing the existence of various entities and states, she enhances the objectivity and persuasiveness of her words, lending the message a more powerful and encouraging impact. This analysis not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings within the Queen's message but also provides a fresh perspective for appreciating and analyzing such formal and dignified speeches.

*E.g. There is a pandemic that has brought untold sorrow to so many families around the world.*

Here, the core of the Existential Process is formed by “There is” which unequivocally identifies the pandemic as an objective phenomenon and underscores the profound grief it has inflicted on countless families globally. This expression not only directly communicates the reality of the pandemic but also enhances the objectivity and credibility of the message by emphasizing the fact of its existence.

In acknowledging the efforts and contributions of people, the Queen once again utilizes the Existential Process, remarking,

*E.g. There are heroes among us, ordinary people who have done extraordinary things to help others in need.*

In this sentence, “There are” constructs the Existential Process, highlighting the heroism that exists within ordinary individuals and their remarkable deeds in assisting those in distress. Through this expression, the Queen not only commends the bravery and kindness of individuals but also underscores the significance of these spirits during difficult times.

*E.g. There is a light that is shining through the darkness, a light of hope, a light of unity, a light of love.*

The Queen emphasizes the importance of unity and hope through the Existential Process. “There is” serves as the marker of the Existential Process, emphasizing the existence of positive forces such as hope, unity, and love. By highlighting the presence of these forces, the Queen inspires courage in facing challenges and communicates an optimistic attitude towards the future.

### 3.1.6. Behavioral Process

Within this framework, the Behavioral Process specifically refers to the depiction of conscious human actions and accompanying psychological states. In her 2020 Christmas speech, Queen Elizabeth II skillfully employed the Behavioral Process to capture the behavioral and psychological responses of people amidst the pandemic, thereby conveying profound emotions and thoughts.

*E.g. Many of us will feel a painful sense of loss this year, but now, as we end the year, it is my sincere wish that Christmas can be a time of peace, hope, and reflection for all.*

The Queen emphasized people’s inner feelings through the Behavioral Process.

“feel a painful sense of loss” constitutes a Behavioral Process, directly portraying the sense of loss and pain that people have experienced during the pandemic. Through this depiction, the Queen not only expressed a profound understanding of people’s inner feelings but also conveyed empathy and comfort.

*E.g. We have seen the best of our human spirit in the way people have responded, with courage and kindness, to the challenges of the past year.*

In this instance, “have responded with courage and kindness” forms the Behavioral Process, highlighting the

bravery and kindness displayed by individuals in the face of challenges. Through this depiction, the Queen not only commended people's positive actions but also emphasized the significance of the human spirit in times of difficulty.

### 3.2. Transitivity Analysis of Interpersonal Meta-function

In Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, interpersonal function is realized by mood, modality and person system (Halliday, 1999: 526). The mood system is divided into: statement, question and imperative mood. In the Queen's Christmas speech, all are declarative sentences. Because the Queen's speech faces the camera rather than the real crowd underneath, the particularity of the political text makes the Queen's Christmas speech generally use few questions and imperatives, so the people do not need to answer, and there is no direct verbal connection between the two.

#### 3.2.1. Modality

In her 2020 Christmas address, Queen Elizabeth II employed a range of modal expressions that not only reflected her royal authority but also communicated profound emotions and care. Modal verbs, conditional sentences, and subjunctive moods were skillfully woven into her speech, creating a tapestry of sentiment and aspiration.

E.g. *We have been reminded that life is fragile and our time together must be cherished.*

In this example, the modal verb "must" serves to emphasize the imperative nature of cherishing our time together, reflecting the Queen's deep belief in the value of human companionship and the fragility of life. This modal expression not only underscores the Queen's authority but also her compassion and understanding.

E.g. *As we look forward to the year ahead, may we remember the strength and goodness that has been revealed during our recent trials...*

The Queen also employed conditional sentences and the subjunctive mood to express her hopes and aspirations for the future. For instance, in the phrase, the subjunctive mood "may we remember" serves to convey a wish or prayer. The Queen hopes that, as we move into the new year, we will retain the memory of the resilience and kindness displayed during our recent challenges. This modal expression is both gentle and optimistic, reflecting the Queen's faith in humanity's ability to overcome adversity.

Overall, the Queen's modal expressions in her 2020 Christmas address were not only diverse but also deeply meaningful. They effectively communicated her royal authority, compassion, and optimism for the future. By employing modal verbs, conditional sentences, and subjunctive moods, the Queen crafted a speech that was both powerful and emotionally resonant, resonating deeply with her audience and leaving a lasting impression.

#### 3.2.2. Person

The Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom skillfully utilized personal pronouns in her 2020 Christmas speech, effectively demonstrating her authority as the head of state while also exhibiting warmth and affinity. Through this, she conveyed profound care and encouragement to the people.

E.g. *As we gather together at this time of year, we remember those who have died, and those who have shown great courage and kindness in difficult circumstances.*

When describing the nation's collective response to challenges, the Queen frequently employed the first-person

singular "I" and plural "we" in her speech to underscore her authority and shared identity with the citizens. The use of "we" not only bridged the psychological gap between the Queen and the people but also fostered a shared emotional bond as they faced difficulties and challenges together.

Also, the Queen cleverly employed the second-person pronoun "you" to establish a direct connection with her audience and express concern and encouragement.

E.g. *You have shown resilience and compassion in the face of adversity.*

She discussed the impact of the pandemic on people's lives by directly addressing "you". The Queen acknowledged the bravery and kindness of her listeners, simultaneously conveying a message of perseverance and encouragement.

The Queen also utilized third-person pronouns such as "they" and "their" to acknowledge those who have contributed to society and those who require special care and assistance. This usage maintained objectivity and a sense of distance while highlighting individuals and groups deserving of respect and attention.

E.g. *They have given so much in the service of others, often at great personal sacrifice.*

Through her praise and respect for healthcare workers, the Queen expressed admiration for their selfless dedication, inspiring more people to show concern and support for them.

In conclusion, the Queen Elizabeth II effectively employed personal pronouns in her 2020 Christmas speech, successfully fostering emotional connections and interactions with the people. This not only reflected her authority and affinity as the head of state but also conveyed profound care and encouragement to the people. This utilization of personal pronouns aligns with the theoretical description of interpersonal function in linguistics and fully demonstrates the Queen's proactive role as a public figure during this special period.

### 3.3. Transitivity Analysis of Textual Meta-function

In Functional Grammar theory, cohesion is a vital means of achieving textual coherence, linking various parts together through lexical and grammatical relationships. Queen Elizabeth II's 2020 Christmas message serves as an excellent example, employing intricate cohesive devices to create a logically coherent and emotionally charged discourse.

Regarding lexical cohesion, the Queen repeatedly employs key terms such as "unity" and "challenge" not only emphasizing the theme but also fostering a strong lexical resonance throughout the speech.

E.g. *This year, many of us will spend Christmas in a way which is different from normal. Yet at its heart, Christmas remains a simple and deeply reassuring reminder of the immutable truths which bind us together: love, sacrifice, and selfless commitment to others.*

Here, the term "together" resonates with "unity" and foreshadows the subsequent narrative on the collective facing of challenges and difficulties.

E.g. *We have been presented with a challenge that affects us all, and we are reminded that we are never alone.*

The juxtaposition of "challenge" and "alone" underscores the ubiquity of challenges but also the unity and mutual assistance that enable us to face them collectively.

In terms of grammatical cohesion, the Queen employs a rich variety of sentence structures and connecting words, enhancing the logical rigor of the speech.

E.g. *We have been united in our shared experiences, and this has been a time of great reflection, of newfound appreciation for the essential roles that so many people play in our lives.*

She described people's courage in the face of adversity, "and" not only joins two sentences but also bridges our shared experiences with profound reflection, revealing how people have not only united in their struggles but also gained new insights and understanding from them.

E.g. They have been the guardians of our health, tirelessly striving to protect us all.

The Queen skillfully uses pronouns and omissions to avoid repetition, making the language more concise and clear. In this example, "they" refers to the healthcare workers mentioned earlier, while "us all" is an omission of the previously mentioned "we", enhancing the coherence of the speech through such referential and elliptical devices.

Overall, Queen Elizabeth II's 2020 Christmas message exhibits meticulous lexical and grammatical cohesion, constructing a coherent and emotionally charged discourse. Through the repetition of key terms, the employment of connecting words and pronouns, she seamlessly links various parts together, creating a logically rigorous and emotionally charged whole. This cohesive discourse not only facilitates the effective transmission of information but also enhances the language's persuasiveness and emotional impact, enabling people to profoundly feel the Queen's emphasis and call for unity, courage, and hope.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper makes a comprehensive and in-depth functional discourse analysis of the Queen's 2020 Christmas speech. It mainly analyzes the speech from the three meta-functions of language-conceptual function and textual interpersonal function.

At the level of conceptual function, the Queen vividly depicts the social picture, the emotional changes of the people and the efforts and achievements of the country during the epidemic period with precise and infectious vocabulary and sentence patterns. Her language not only objectively and truly reflects the social status quo, but also shows her optimistic expectation for the future and effectively conveys the core content of the speech.

In terms of interpersonal function, the Queen has

successfully constructed a deep emotional bond with the audience with her unique gentle and firm tone. She expressed her deep concern and support for the people, her great respect and gratitude to the front-line workers, and her ardent expectation and encouragement to the younger generation. The establishment of this emotional resonance and trust relationship makes the speech more convincing and appealing, and makes the audience deeply resonate and agree.

In terms of textual function, the Queen makes the whole speech present a coherent and complete structure through clever textual layout and logical cohesion. She uses rich rhetorical devices and cohesive devices to make the various parts of the speech echo and closely connect with each other, thus effectively conveying the overall intention and theme of the speech.

In general, the Queen's Christmas speech in 2020 is a model to show the three meta-functions of language. Through in-depth analysis, we can not only appreciate the Queen's exquisite language art, but also deeply understand the social and cultural significance and value contained in the speech. At the same time, it also provides valuable enlightenment for us to further explore the complex relationship between language and society, culture and politics.

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