

Analysis of Cohesive Devices of Mark Rober's Address to MIT Class of 2023

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Abstract: Cohesion is one of the core concepts in discourse research, first proposed by Halliday and Hasan as early as 1976. They believe that if one part of a discourse plays a crucial role in understanding another part, then there is a connection between these two parts. They divide cohesive devices into grammatical devices and lexical devices. The grammatical devices include reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction, and the lexical devices include reiteration and collocation. Based on the cohesion theory of Halliday and Hasan, this paper analyzes the grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion of Mark Rober's address to MIT class of 2023. By systematically studying the application of cohesion theory in speeches, the audience can better understand Mark Rober's intention in his speech and have a certain understanding of the discourse layout of his speech. It is helpful for the audience to have a comprehensive understanding of the speech text; meanwhile, this can also help English learners understand the practical application of cohesion theory and apply it to social practice.

Keywords: Cohesion Theory, Public Speech, Grammatical Cohesion, Lexical Cohesion.

1. Introduction

Discourse analysis specializes in studying the structural characteristics and functions of discourse. The theories and methods of discourse analysis are widely applied in various fields, and cohesion theory is the most important part of it. There are many foreign and domestic scholars studying cohesion theory, such as Halliday, Hasan, Hoey, Hu Zhuanglin and so on. Among their theories, the most famous one is Halliday and Hasan's cohesion theory. The publication of Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in English* marks the establishment of cohesion theory. Since then, it has laid its theoretical foundation for the development of cohesion theory and discourse analysis. They propose five main cohesive devices: reference, substitution, ellipsis, connection, and lexical cohesion. Most domestic scholars only focus on the types of cohesive mechanisms and lack independent research methods for systematic and appropriate discourse analysis.

In recent years, we have found that many studies on cohesive devices mainly focus on English teaching and translation texts rather than speech. However, public speech is the main research object of general stylistics. It plays an important role in our daily life. It focuses on one topic with highly structured format and more formal language, and makes the expression more effective. In addition, a good public speech can't do without an excellent speaker. To make the public speech more powerful and persuasive, the speaker needs to demonstrate authority. Meanwhile, a good public speech also relies on the application of cohesive devices. He uses a lot of cohesive devices in his speech, making it easier to understand. In this way, the application of cohesion theory in public speech can't be ignored. Systematically studying the application of the cohesion theory to speeches can help listeners better understand the speakers' intended expression, and it can also enable English learners to better apply the cohesion theory to social practice. In this way, it is of great significance to analyze speeches with cohesion theory. This thesis is guided by Halliday and Hasan's cohesion theory, aiming to help the audience better understand this speech and

provide a new approach for English learners to learn discourse analysis, allowing them to flexibly apply cohesion theory in social practice.

This thesis will provide new content for the corpus. This thesis uses cohesion theory and quantitative analysis method to analyze the whole text of Mark Rober's address, mainly in terms of grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. The analysis of this thesis focuses on how Mark Rober uses cohesive devices to attract the attention of the audience, so that graduates can understand that success begins with trial. As long as they have optimistic expectations for the future and keep working hard for it, success will always come.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies of Cohesion Theory

As an important theoretical branch of discourse research, cohesion theory has always been favored by scholars at home and abroad. Many researches on cohesion theory have also made significant progress. In 1976, Halliday and Hasan first proposed cohesion theory in their book *Cohesion in English*. They believed that "cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another" (Halliday and Hasan 4). Cohesion was an important means of discourse analysis, appearing in the surface structure of a discourse in an explicit language expression. They divided cohesive devices into grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Based on Halliday and Hasan's discourse cohesion theory, Martin developed the semantic and contextual layers of classical theory by exploring the semantic system and structure of discourse. He argued that "lexical relations represent the discourse semantics of experiential meaning" (Martin 372). He believed that vocabulary and grammar were the basic inputs of discourse analysis, but his focus was on the contextual constraints. In addition to lexical cohesion, some scholars focused on grammatical cohesion. Hanita Masithoh and Sayyidatui Fadlilah analyzed grammatical cohesion in recount texts of "Pathway to English" and pointed out that "the importance of studying cohesion,

especially cohesive devices (grammatical and lexical) are to create a useful and systematic text and to make easily understand what information is delivered in it" (78); that is, it was of great significance to study cohesion theory that helps us to understand the author or speaker's intention better. Siti Marfu'ah and Khristianto pointed out that "reference is a part of cohesion that serves to give good understanding for readers to read text" (77).

On the basis of foreign research, many domestic scholars have also put forward their own views and promoted the development of cohesion theory. Hu Zhuanglin, taking Halliday and Hasan's cohesion theory as the basic framework, further explored and elaborated lexical cohesion and divided it into five cohesive modes. In his book called *Cohesion and Coherence of Discourse*, he thought that "the cohesion and coherence of discourse are inevitably reflected at different levels" (Hu Zhuanglin, 240). Based on Halliday and Hasan's research, Hu Zhuanglin put forward the theory of theme and rheme, context and pragmatics, and discourse structure. He did not limit the theory of cohesion to the grammatical and lexical levels, but extended it to the phonological level. Qin Mingli, Zhang Delu also conducted research on the theory of cohesion. Qin Mingli believed that Halliday and Hasan's cohesive theory generally stayed at the lexical and grammatical level, and therefore it belonged to the category of superficial cohesive bonds. In addition to the five types they mentioned, there should also be other surface cohesive devices, such as tense consistency, structural opposition, and phonology. In terms of functional stylistics, Zhang Delu established a theoretical framework of stylistic analysis of "text-context-text" based on Halliday's functional stylistics theory, including three steps of text presentation, text analysis and text interpretation, and analyzed how the cohesive mechanism reflected the stylistic characteristics. In recent years, Wang Yun and Huang Fengge pointed out that "studying and integrating lexical cohesion techniques can help improve one's mastery of vocabulary and cultivate a sense of language; especially when applied in writing or speech, lexical cohesion can promote sentence coherence, enrich discourse content, and further enhance English expression skills" (102).

From the above review of cohesion theories, we can see that most scholars' studies are based on the framework of Halliday and Hasan's cohesion theory and slightly modified on its basis. Halliday and Hasan's cohesion theory has a landmark meaning for the development of later cohesion theories.

3. Cohesion Theory

3.1. Definition of Cohesion

The publication of *Cohesion in English* coauthored by Halliday and Hasan symbolizes the establishment of cohesion theory. In *Cohesion in English*, they think that "the concept of cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text" (Halliday and Hasan 4). "The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. When it happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text" (Halliday and Hasan 4). Cohesion is a part of the language system, and the concept of cohesion is established to explain the relationships in a discourse. Cohesion refers to the range of possibilities that

exist to connect something with something that happened before, and this connection is achieved through meaningful relationships. Cohesive relations are about structure, and they are often about meaning within a sentence or between sentences.

We all know that cohesion and coherence are two important factors in discourse analysis, and they are both distinct and interrelated. Cohesion is a tangible entity on the surface of a discourse, while coherence is an intangible internal relationship at the bottom of the discourse. Coherence is an intangible network of discourse, which exists at the bottom of the discourse and achieves semantic connection through logical reasoning. It is one of the fundamental characteristics of discourse, and without coherence, there would be no discourse. Meanwhile, unlike the objectivity of cohesion, coherence has subjectivity and requires the listener to grasp the speaker's intention based on contextual information and pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, the more thoroughly the listeners understand the discourse, the better they will grasp the coherence of the discourse.

3.2. Classification of Cohesion

3.2.1. Grammatical Cohesion

"What characterizes this particular type of cohesion, that which we are calling reference, is the specific nature of the information that is signalled for retrieval" (Halliday & Hasan, 31). They think that there are three types of reference: personal reference, demonstrative reference and comparative reference. Personal reference refers to a reference that plays a role in a language context and has a personal category. Demonstrative reference is reference by means of location, on a scale of proximity. Comparative reference is indirect reference by means of identity and similarity.

"Substitution is a relation in the wording rather than in the meaning" (Halliday & Hasan, 88). Halliday and Hasan point out that there are three types of substitution: nominal substitution, verbal substitution and clausal substitution. Nominal substitution is the most common method we see in English; that is, using pronouns or some nouns to replace nouns and noun phrases, especially using personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns and relative pronouns to translate repeated parts, which is one of the most common and effective methods. The verbal substitution in English is "do", which operates as head of a verbal group and replaces the verb or verb phrase in the previous text. What clausal substitutions like "so" and "not" refer to is not an element within the clause but an entire clause.

"Ellipsis can be interpreted as that form of substitution in which the item is replaced by nothing" (Halliday & Hasan, 88). It can be regarded as substitution by zero. It can be divided into nominal ellipsis, verbal ellipsis, clausal ellipsis.

"With conjunction, on the other hand, we move into a different type of semantic relation, one which is no longer any kind of a search instruction, but a specification of the way in which what is to follow is systematically connected to what has gone before" (Halliday & Hasan, 237). There are four types of conjunctions: additive conjunctions, adversative conjunctions, casual conjunctions, temporal conjunctions. In order to make their language more logical, language speakers often intentionally use many conjunctions. They play a very important role in making the text more coherent.

3.2.2. Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion doesn't deal with problems of grammatical or semantic connection, but with problems based

on lexical connection. In other words, its contribution to textual meaning is determined by the continuity of lexical meaning. Liu Hongjian and Hu Xiaoqiong point out that “Lexical cohesion becomes an important bond between a series of words, which is crucial in constructing the theme of a discourse and making it coherent” (155). In this way, lexical cohesion is of great significance in a discourse and using lexical cohesion can help us improve our discourse analysis skills.

Halliday and Hasan divide lexical cohesion into two types: reiteration and collocation. Reiteration includes four forms: repetition, superordinate, general word. Collocation is that once one word is mentioned, people will naturally associate another. Collocation can effectively form a lexical cohesion chain around a topic, allowing us to quickly grasp the topic of the text.

This thesis focuses on grammatical cohesion including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion consisting of repetition, synonym, general word and collocation. Grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion play a crucial role in analyzing texts. They help audience have a more comprehensive and objective understanding of the text.

4. Cohesive Device Analysis in Mark Rober’s Address

4.1. Analysis of Grammatical Cohesive Devices

In Mark Rober’s Address to MIT Class of 2023, Mark Rober mainly uses reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction in grammatical cohesive devices to achieve coherence of discourse.

4.1.1. Reference

Halliday and Hasan point out that “In the case of reference the information to be retrieved is the referential meaning, the identity of the particular thing or class of things that is being referred to” (31). In this way, reference has the semantic property of definiteness or specificity. In Mark Rober’s speech, we can see that Mark Rober uses many references, especially personal reference. We can see the use of personal references in Mark Rober’s speech through the following table:

Table 1. Personal Reference

Type Form	Personal Reference			Total
	First Person	Second Person	Third Person	
Singular Form	104		56	160
Plural Form	23	136	21	180
Total	127	136	77	340

As we can see from the above table, there are 340 personal references throughout the speech. The second person plural form is the most frequently used.

Example 1:

*Naive optimism can also help when faced with a big life decision, when **you** feel like **you** want to know the results before **you** decide, but the true outcome is simply unknowable.*

In example 1, Mark Rober refers to all graduates of MIT 2023 in the second person. He wants to tell graduates that no one can accurately predict his future, and there is no standard answer to reach the end of success. Mark Rober uses the second personal pronouns three times to engage graduates in the speech and strengthen their sense of ownership. Using

second personal pronouns can also strengthen the sense of responsibility among graduates. They will make continuous efforts for the unknown future with an optimistic attitude and make contributions to the country in the future.

In *Cohesion in English*, Halliday and Hasan believe that “the remaining demonstratives this, these, that, those, and the refer to the location of some thing, typically some entity-person or object-that is participating in the process” (58). With data statistics, the use of demonstrative references can be seen as follows:

Table 2. Demonstrative Reference

Type	N%	Number	Proposition
the		109	50%
this		28	12.8%
these		3	1.4%
that		42	19.3%
those		10	4.6%
here		7	3.2%
there		6	2.8%
now		8	3.6%
then		5	2.3%
Total		218	100%

As we can see from the above table, there are 218 demonstrative references throughout the speech. “The” is the most frequently used. The demonstrative references are divided into two categories: exophora and endophora (anaphora and cataphora). In Mark Rober’s speech, “the” as exophora and anaphora is prominent.

Example 2:

The world is so different, even from four years ago.

“Exophoric reference contributes to the creation of text, in that it links the language with the context of situation; but it does not contribute to the integration of one passage with another so that the two together form part of the same text” (Halliday and Hasan 37). In example 2, “the world” refers to the place where we all live now. In this speech, both the speaker and the audience know the place mentioned. It is the place where we live now. And it is identifiable on extralinguistic grounds, so it belongs to exophora.

In the whole speech, personal pronouns and demonstrative pronouns are the most obvious in terms of reference. They make the speech more coherent and easier for the audience to understand.

4.1.2. Substitution

Halliday and Hasan believe that “substitution is a relation between linguistic items, such as words or phrases” (89). Substitution focuses on the level of vocabulary. Substitution can be categorized into three groups: the nominal substitution, the verbal substitution and the clausal substitution.

Example 3:

*If you want to cross the river, you have to start on the bank and look at the first several rocks in front of you...But at some point, you’ve just got to pick **one** and jump, because the river is dynamic and always changing.*

In example 3, “one” substitutes the rock in the previous clause. It refers to a general term, not a specific stone. Mark Rober wants to tell graduates that the world is changing like a river. They must find a stone to cross the river and lead to the other side of success. He emphasizes that if the chosen stone represents a hobby, the graduates can do things with curiosity and enthusiasm.

In order to understand the sentences with substitution, we

need to search the information from the context before and after the substitution. The use of substitution provides cohesion within the discourse.

4.1.3. Ellipsis

Halliday and Hasan believe that “ellipsis, as we have already remarked, is in this respect simply a kind of substitution; it can be defined as substitution by zero” (89). Ellipsis tends to be more fully exploited in speech than in writing. It is divided into three types: nominal ellipsis, verbal ellipsis and clausal ellipsis.

Example 4:

But, Mark, you told us were only going to give us three pieces of advice. Here's a fourth, because, why not (give the fourth advice)?

This is an example of nominal ellipsis and verbal ellipsis. The omitted element is “give the fourth advice”. By omitting nouns and verbs, the unnecessary repetition from the previous text is avoided; highlighting Mark Rober’s fourth suggestion should be mentioned here. The fourth suggestion provides a better supplement to the first three suggestions. Nominal ellipsis and verbal ellipsis are beneficial for forming a more coherent discourse and allowing the audience to understand the speech more smoothly in an efficient way.

4.1.4. Conjunction

Conjunction is slightly different from other cohesive devices like reference, substitution and ellipsis. Halliday and Hasan point out that “conjunctive elements are cohesive not in themselves but indirectly, by virtue of their specific meanings” (226); that is, conjunction is the premise of expressing a certain meaning based on the existence of other components in the discourse. The conjunction can be divided into four types: additive conjunction, adversative conjunction, casual conjunction and temporal conjunction.

Example 5:

*And **not only** will you learn more and do it faster; **but** it will make all the successful jumps along the way that much sweeter.*

There are many additive conjunctions in the speech. In example 5, Mark Rober uses “not only...but...” to connect two simple sentences. Mark Rober points out that remembering failures and learning from defeats will help them move faster towards success and make them happier every time they succeed.

Hanita Masithoh and Sayyidatui Fadlilah point out that “the importance of studying cohesion, especially cohesive devices (grammatical and lexical) are to create a useful and systematic text and to make easily understand what information is delivered in it” (78). In this way, it is of great significance to study the cohesive devices, which let the audience understand the speech better.

4.2. Analysis of Lexical Cohesive Devices

Cohesion refers to the role of word choice in a text. Lexical cohesion does not deal with problems of grammatical or semantic connection, but with problems based on lexical connection. In other words, its contribution to textual meaning is determined by the continuity of lexical meaning. Liu Hongjian and Hu Xiaoqiong believe that analyzing the lexical cohesion of speeches could help us improve our discourse analysis skills. The importance of lexical cohesion can be seen from this sentence. The main types of lexical cohesion are reiteration and collocation. Mark Rober uses them in his speech.

4.2.1. Reiteration

“Reiteration is a form of lexical cohesion which involves the repetition of a lexical item, at one end of the scale; the use of a general word to refer back to a lexical item, at the other end of scale; and a number of things in between—the use of a synonym, near-synonym, or superordinate” (Halliday and Hasan 278). Reiteration is an important aspect of lexical cohesion. The reiteration is divided into four categories: repetition, synonym, superordinate and general word. In Mark Rober’s speech, the main devices are repetition, synonym and general word.

1) Repetition

Wang Yun and Huang Fengge believe that “Repetition refers to the frequent occurrence of words or phrases with the same form and meaning in a discourse” (101). Repetition is common in the texts, and it plays an important role in the texts.

Example 6:

***In the same way** a toddler will want to keep trying to stand up, or **in the same way** you want to keep playing Super Mario Brothers, or **in the same way** half the people who attempted my coding puzzle had a desire to stick with it two and half times longer.*

In example 6, Mark Rober uses “in the same way” for three times. He wants to visualize the process of trying again after failure, deepen the audience’s impression, and make them pay more attention to what the speaker wants to express. Through repetition, Mark Rober wants to tell graduates that if they want to achieve success as much as possible, they must learn to learn and grow from failure.

Vocabulary not only has discourse coherence, but also expresses emotional meaning. When people are extremely happy or sad, they often cannot help but use word repetition to express their emotions.

2) Synonym

“Synonym and near-synonym refer to the corresponding relationships between different words with the same or similar meanings” (Hu Zhuanglin, 118). In speeches, sometimes in order to maintain language coherence while avoiding auditory fatigue and boredom from the audience, speakers often use synonyms to replace repetitive vocabulary.

Example 7:

*And you pick what you think is the best **path** and just move forward, knowing there's more than one **trail** that leads to the top of Mount Fuji.*

In example 7, Mark Rober uses the pair of synonyms “path” and “trail”, which have relatively consistent semantic meaning. The synonymous relationship between these two words naturally connects “trail” and “path” before and after. Mark Rober wants to tell graduates that naive optimism will help them choose the path they believe is the best when facing major choices. At the same time, he cleverly uses synonyms to avoid boredom.

Musaev Abduvali thought that each speech is delivered for a specific purpose and has its own aesthetic impact. Therefore, Mark Rober uses many synonyms to express his specific purpose, keeping the audience focused and avoiding boredom.

3) General Word

Halliday and Hasan point out that “the class of general noun is a small set of nouns having generalized reference within the major noun classes” (274). We may often neglect the general words, but they are an important source of cohesion in the spoken language.

Example 8:

*But I love the **idea** that the ripples from her influence are*

still being felt as strongly as they ever have through the work that I try and do today.

If words are repeated too much, it will give the audience a feeling of vocabulary scarcity. In this way, we can use general words, such as person, thing, place, fact and so on. "Idea" is the general word. Mark Rober uses "idea" to express his mother's influence on him. It is precisely because of his mother that he has an optimistic attitude towards life. He is willing to move towards the unknown in life, and is also willing to work hard to make the world a better place.

General words play a significant role in lexical cohesion. They avoid simple repetition, making the speech more coherent, easier for the audience to accept, and avoiding boredom.

4.2.2. Collocation

Halliday and Hasan point out that "We now come to the most problematical part of lexical cohesion, cohesion that is achieved through the association of lexical items that regularly co-occur" (284). This part of lexical cohesion is collocation. The co-occurrence relationships of vocabulary include antonymous relationships, complementary relationships, partial and overall relationships, and collocation relationships.

Example 9:

But don't forget, as George Carlin pointed out, anyone who's driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone driving faster than you is a maniac. Fostering your relationship closes out my list of three bits of advice, because that may be where your impact is the greatest.

In this example, "slower" and "faster" constitute a co-existing relationship, and they are in contrast. Usually, two antonyms are compared to determine the best state, but neither of these antonyms in this speech is in the best state. This explains a phenomenon to us: we are always accustomed to attributing our mistakes to others rather than ourselves, believing that our own view of the world is objective and free from personal biases. In this way, Mark Rober cites George Carlin's words to suggest fostering the relationship.

Mark Rober uses a lot of grammar cohesion and lexical cohesion. Grammatical cohesion makes the discourse more concise and smooth, allowing the audience to shift their attention to the content that the speaker wants to emphasize. Lexical cohesion enables the cohesive words to correspond to each other and thus achieves consistency in the theme of the discourse.

5. Conclusion

Speech is a language communication activity where people speak. The speakers express their inner views on a certain matter through skillful speeches. If a speech achieves the purpose of what the speaker wants to express and can resonate with the audience, then the speech must be cohesive and coherent.

Based on Halliday and Hasan's theory of cohesion, this paper combines specific examples to conduct a discourse analysis of Mark Rober's speech to MIT class of 2023 from the perspectives of grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion, and explores the embodiment of cohesive devices in the speech. In grammatical cohesion, Mark Rober mainly uses references, substitutions, ellipsis and conjunctions; in lexical cohesion, **reiteration** (repetition, synonyms, general

words) and collocations are used. Reference is most frequently used in speeches. The use of reference makes communication between the speaker and the audience more direct and efficient, making it easier for the audience to diverting the audience's attention to the content that the speaker wants to emphasize. The frequency of using conjunctions in this speech is also high. They make this speech more logical, discourse more coherent, and make it sound natural and smooth. Lexical cohesion is the most commonly used cohesive device. Repetition not only enhances the tone, but also helps to highlight the theme of the speech. Synonyms prevent monotony in the speech, making the organization of discourse flexible and diverse. General words prevent redundant repetition in speeches and make the discourse more coherent. Collocation forms a lexical chain of words, making the discourse more consistent.

The length of the text is limited, so this thesis only conducts a cohesive theory analysis of the most representative examples in one of Mark Rober's speeches. If conditions permit in the future, the thesis will be expanded to conduct a comprehensive and systematic analysis of Mark Rober's other speeches and explore his writing style.

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