

## Interpersonal Metaphors in English Reading Comprehension

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### Abstract

Generally speaking, listening, speaking, reading and writing are four basic skills for English learners. Reading as a mean to learn English is indispensable in the process of English learning. Thus, English reading comprehension is especially important for English learners. However, grammatical metaphor in reading materials is always one of the reasons that cause troubles for English learners. Because of grammatical metaphors students may miss or misunderstand some important information in English reading materials. Thus, it is essential to conduct a deep research on grammatical metaphors. And this article will explore how interpersonal metaphors influence students' English reading comprehension. This article will explore this kind of influence from two aspects: one is the Mood metaphors; the other is the Modality metaphors. In addition, some cases will be listed to support the ideas. Meanwhile, some feasible suggestions on English reading comprehension will be put forward.

**Keywords:** English reading comprehension; English learners; Interpersonal metaphors; Mood metaphors; Modality metaphors; Writers' attention.

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### INTRODUCTION

The word "metaphor" derives from the ancient Greek word "metapherein". Ever since the time of Aristotle, researchers approached metaphors in different academic fields. Thus, the study of metaphor has a long history. Metaphor not only occurs at the lexical level but also occurs at the grammatical level. Metaphors at the grammatical level are called grammatical metaphors. And the concept of grammatical metaphor was initially introduced by Halliday. It refers to the possibility of re-setting the relationship between meanings and wordings, which is central resource for expanding the meaning potential of language [1]. Briefly speaking, grammatical metaphor refers to the fact that a marked way is used to express the meaning. Grammatical metaphor is an important concept in Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. According to Halliday, grammatical metaphors can be classified into three categories: interpersonal metaphor, ideational metaphor and textual metaphor [1].

When a text is analyzed, especially when transitivity is worked on, problems in deciding how to best code certain wordings will arise [2]. For example, the transitivity labels that seem most easily applicable do not seem to capture all the meanings. There are a lot of reasons that cause problems. Among these reasons grammatical metaphor is one of the most common sources of difficulties. Grammatical metaphor will slow

down students' reading speed. Meanwhile, because of grammatical metaphor, the text becomes more complex. In a word, a lot of grammatical metaphors in text make the text more difficult for English learners to understand. At the same time, development of students' abilities to learn language will be restricted by grammatical metaphor. Therefore, it is necessary for students to know something about grammatical metaphor, which can reduce difficulties in reading and improve students' communicative and creative competence in terms of language.

Scholars at home and abroad have conducted deep researches on grammatical metaphor. Many scholars at home combine grammatical metaphor with foreign language teaching. For example, Li Ruifang and Meng Lingxin [3] hold the idea that the complexities of grammatical metaphor reduce the language input. Other scholars, such as Xiong Xueliang and Liu Donghong [4] through empirical study found that the higher competence the second language students have in terms of English reading comprehension, the higher competence they will have in terms of metaphorical thinking and expression. However, there are no substantial theoretical results. Dong Hongle and Yang Xiaoying [5] have explored the important role of ideational metaphor in texts. Sun Yi and Chen Lang [6] systematically and comprehensively have analyzed how grammatical metaphors influence reading, speaking,

writing and foreign language teaching. This article will explore the indispensable role of interpersonal metaphor in English reading. It takes the focus on how Mood metaphors and Modality metaphors cause difficulties in reading. Meanwhile, some feasible suggestions on improving students' competence of English reading comprehension, language skills and cognitive competence will be put forward.

### **A Brief Introduction to the Theory of Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor**

The interpersonal metafunction of language is achieved by the Mood and Modality. Whether in the expression of Mood or in the expression of Modality, when the non-congruent ways are resorted to convey meaning, interpersonal metaphors occur. Interpersonal metaphor can be classified into Mood metaphor and Modality metaphor.

#### **Mood Metaphor**

Mood is used to express the purposes of people's speaking. According to different speech roles and different commodities that are exchanged, there are four basic functions of language: statement, question, offer and command [1]. These basic functions are closely associated with particular grammatical structures. Generally speaking, statements are most naturally expressed by declarative clauses; questions by interrogative clauses; and commands by imperative clauses [2]. However, sometimes the functions and grammatical structures are not always consistent. Apart from imperative clauses, interrogative clauses and declarative clauses are used to achieve the purpose of command. Taking the following clauses as examples:

- a. Open the window!
- b. Can you open the window?
- c. I'd like you to open the window.

All of these three clauses achieve the function of command. The first clause uses the imperative clause, while the second and the third clause use the interrogative clause and declarative clause to achieve the purpose of command. Similarly, statements can be expressed by interrogative clauses and imperative clauses. And questions can be expressed by declarative clauses and imperative clauses. This kind of mismatch between Mood and speech roles is called the Mood metaphor. Thus, it can be concluded that different clauses can be used to achieve the same functions and the same clauses can be used to achieve different functions through Mood metaphors.

#### **Modality Metaphor**

Modality is the expression of the speaker's attitude towards the likelihood or necessity of the proposition. And it is congruently realized by modal verbs. According to Halliday, Modal meaning expression is decided by modal orientations [1]. And the modal orientations can be classified into four categories: explicit subjective, implicit subjective,

implicit objective and explicit objective [2]. Different modal orientations will correspond with different modal meaning expressions. Generally speaking, implicit modal orientation expressed by modal verbs, modal adjuncts and the extension of predicate is non-metaphoric expression, while the explicit Modal orientation belongs to metaphorical expression. Taking the following clauses as examples:

- a. I think Tom knows. (explicit subjective)
- b. Tom will know. (implicit subjective)
- c. It is likely that Tom knows. (explicit objective)
- d. Tom probably knows. (implicit objective)

In the clause b and d, the Modal verb "will" and Modal adjunct "probably" are used. These two clauses resort to an implicit way, which is consistent with modal meaning expression. However, in the clause a and c the explicit way is used, which forms the grammatical metaphorical structure. Clause a takes the form of mental process. And the clause c takes the form of relational process. Both clause a and b use clauses to express speakers' attitudes rather than modal verbs and modal adjuncts, which is a non-congruent way. In these two clauses, the projecting clauses "I think" and "It is likely" are equaled to modal adjuncts. And it is not the projecting clauses but the projected clauses that play a dominant role in expressing speakers' attitudes. This fact can be proved by adding tag questions after clauses. For example, "I think Tom knows, doesn't he?" In the tag question "doesn't he" rather than "don't I" is used.

From the above examples, it can be concluded that both explicit subjective expressions and explicit objective expressions are interpersonal grammatical metaphors. The explicit subjective expressions always take the forms of mental process by using such expressions as "I believe", "I think" and so on. The explicit objective expressions always take the forms of relational process.

### **The Influence of Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor on English Reading Comprehension**

Interpersonal metafunction functions a lot in establishing the social relationships between speakers throughout the use of language in daily life. It refers to the fact that speaker uses specific language structures as the means of his intrusion into speech event: the expression of his comments, his attitudes, his evaluations and the relationship he sets up between himself and the others, which are decided by different communication roles he adopts like informing, questioning and persuading [1]. Mood system and Modality system play significant roles in interpersonal metafunction. Different Moods and Modalities are used to express speakers' attitudes and communicate with readers. When students are doing English reading comprehension, the main tasks for them are to grasp the overall idea of the text, to figure out writers' standpoints and opinions, and to infer writers' writing

intention [7]. Thus, it is no doubt that interpersonal grammatical metaphor makes texts more difficult for students to understand. As a result researches on interpersonal grammatical metaphor are necessary.

### **Mood Metaphors and English Reading Comprehension**

A number of Mood metaphors occur both in spoken form and written form. And in English reading materials, Mood metaphors always occur. Writers usually resort to the non-congruent ways to express their intentions and opinions. When Mood metaphors are used, both grammatical structures and meanings of words contribute to the meanings of the expressions [8]. However, sometimes, students cannot have better understandings of the function of language and writers' intentions when Mood metaphors occur in reading materials. And some students even hold the idea that it is this kind of wordings that makes the text incoherent. Taking the following clauses as examples:

“Don't be ridiculous! He thought to himself. Stop imagining this! This guy isn't a criminal. What's the use of panicking?”

These words are taken from a passage about taking a free ride. John who got a free ride was misunderstood as a criminal. And then something interesting happened. In this example, the interrogative clause “What's the use of panicking?” is used to achieve the purpose of command instead of asking for information, which can be considered as a Mood metaphor. By using the Mood metaphor which is non-congruent, the panic of the driver is vividly described. A tense atmosphere is created, which foreshadowed the later section and makes the former part more compact. Accordingly, Mood metaphor can reflect speakers' tense emotions and plays a significant role in the coherence of the text.

What comes next in importance is that Mood metaphor reflects the complex relationship between the function of language and the Mood system. One kind of Mood can realize one or more functions of language. At the same time, the same function of language can be achieved by different Moods. These different forms of expression will lead to different meanings and different textual effects. Choice is an important concept in systemic functional grammar. According to Halliday, choice is meaning [1]. Because grammatical metaphorical choice adds some semantic characteristics for the expression, grammatical metaphor itself is a meaningful choice. Different choices are made because of a variety factors: context, roles of the participants, their relationships and their attitudes. Hence, analyzing the Mood metaphors in discourse enables students to have good commands of the language style, the characteristics and mind states of the participants and relationships between participants so that the discourse

can be better understood. Taking the following dialogues as an example:

Mary: I want to see my daughter.

Tom: You cannot see her.

Mary: Don't get defensive...I just want to meet my daughter.

Tom: I am not getting defensive. Who left the kid at home and walked out of the house for a year?

In this dialogue, Tom uses a declarative clause “Who left the kid at home and walked out of the house for a year?” to fulfill the function of stating the facts instead of asking for information. Here the use of Mood metaphor highlighted the fierce conflict between this couple. Meanwhile, Tom's compliant and grudge against Mary is vividly described. The relationships between participants and their characteristics belong to the additional meaning of Mood metaphors. Thus, analyzing Mood metaphors is necessary for students to understand the implied meaning.

### **Modality Metaphors and English Reading Comprehension**

For the sake of special textual effects, writers will resort to the forms of Modality metaphors. In addition, Modality metaphors can create special textual effects. On the other hand, a lot of Modality metaphors in discourse prevent students from understanding writers' thoughts and intentions. Therefore, these Modality metaphors bring a lot of difficulties for students to have better understandings of the discourse.

First, the author of the text will use such grammatical structures as “I believe...” and “I think...” to express his or her attitudes. Obviously, these grammatical structures take the forms of explicit subjective. These grammatical structures are Modality metaphors which exactly accord with the way of Chinese students' expression [9]. Hence, sometimes Chinese students will be clear about author's attitudes and intentions. However, there exist degrees of expression of Modality. According to Halliday, the expression of Modality can be classified into three values: high value, median value and low value. Structures as “I think...” and “I think...” cannot show the value of Modality. Therefore, students cannot understand the deep meaning of the expression.

Second, in English reading materials, the writer will resort to the explicit objective Modal orientation to downplay his or her attitudes and cancel the sources of emotions. Hence, understanding the hiding meaning is one of the difficulties in reading. Students usually cannot make clear about the writer's intention and attitudes. Sometimes, they even have no idea about where the writer expresses his or her attitudes. Consequently, Modality metaphors make the discourse more difficult to understand. Here is an example:

“Yet, it is a very plain and elementary truth that the life, the fortune, and the happiness of every one of us, and more or less, of those who are connected with us, do depend upon our knowing something of...”

In this example, the author does not express his attitudes explicitly. He employs a clause “it is a very plain and elementary truth” which takes the form of a relational process. This Modality metaphor which is achieved by the explicit objective modality makes what the writer says more objective. However, it is just ostensibly objective. Thus, writer’s emotion is canceled. And at the same time, source of the Modality of the clause becomes vague. Students who are not familiar with this kind of expression will not consider it as the expression of writer’s attitudes.

Moreover, explicit objective Modality can be achieved through the operation of nominalization. Words such as possibility, probability, likelihood, certainty, determination are all the products of nominalization. This kind of use experientializes the expression of writer’s attitudes [2]. And in the text, one of the important techniques is to objectify opinion by nominalization, so as to make it more difficult for the reader or hearer to disagree with it [9]. Similarly, evaluation can be expressed through a nominalization, which can make it appear to be more objective and factual. Thus, what the writer says seems to be unquestioning. At the same time, the source of the emotion is canceled. However, it is said that nominalization is not one but two steps away from the most congruent wording. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult for readers to make clear about the writer’s perceptions [2].

“We don’t really know what causes this inefficient or prompt walking. One possibility is that the babies’ never system and digestive system are not yet working well enough.”

From the above example, the source of emotion is vague. The nominal expression of Modality experientializes interpersonal meanings. So that the writer will get rid of Modal responsibility. And the evaluation of the writer will be objectified, which makes readers miss the important point.

When students are doing the reading test, writers’ attitudes and opinions are always the difficulties for students to understand. It is no doubt that each text includes the writer’s own attitudes whether these attitudes are expressed explicitly or implicitly. Sometimes, the writer does not explicitly express his attitudes. On the other hand, he uses Modality metaphors for many times. What students should do is to make clear whether the writer expresses his attitudes implicitly.

In general, using Modality metaphor is a way to cancel the writer’s attitudes. If students have known this fact, they will realize the behind reason. The reason is that using Modality metaphors can make the statements more objective. Especially, in news or technical articles, in order to make the article more objective, the writer sometimes cancels the source of emotion by using the Modality metaphors. Therefore, understanding the explicit objective Modality expression enables students to know the source of the emotion and have good commands of writer’s intentions and perceptions.

## CONCLUSION

The complex and rich system of interpersonal grammatical metaphors provide many choices for the writer. The employment of Mood metaphors makes language more flexible. At the same time, by using Mood metaphors the description of things or participants becomes more vivid. Moreover, Modality metaphors create special effects for the discourse. Meanwhile, it also diversifies language. However, a number of interpersonal grammatical metaphors in texts make the text difficult to understand. Students who are engaged in doing reading exercises will not grasp writers’ opinions and miss or even misunderstand some necessary information. And overall speaking, students’ interpersonal grammatical metaphor competence in reading comprehension is low, which makes a big obstacle and hinder for the improvement of English reading comprehension. Thus, it is essential to cultivate students’ grammatical metaphor competence to improve their reading comprehension.

Nowadays, the intensive reading class takes focus on the learning of new words and understand the complicated clauses. Briefly speaking the complicated clauses refers to clauses that have complex grammatical structures. At the same time, it also refers to clauses that embody grammatical metaphors including interpersonal grammatical metaphors. In order to have better understandings of texts, the instructor should not only help students to classify the logical relationship among clauses but also enable students to analyze the grammatical metaphors such as interpersonal metaphors and realize writers’ attitudes.

In extensive reading classes, teaching focuses on the main idea of the text and comprehending the text as a whole. If teachers can improve students’ competence of analyzing interpersonal metaphors, students can pack the information flow and better comprehend the text as a whole. Briefly speaking, teachers should pay more attention to the expressions of interpersonal grammatical metaphors. When they explain reading materials, they can instruct students how to analyze interpersonal grammatical metaphors to get the implied meaning. Moreover, after class, students can do some practices on interpersonal grammatical metaphors in reading.

The existing criterion is set with reference to the accuracy in grammar. As a result, little attention has been paid to the effectiveness or impressiveness of the composition. All of these facts cause students' low competence in metaphorical expression. Therefore, in teaching, teachers should encourage students to both understand interpersonal metaphors and express in a metaphorical way in writing and speaking.

### Limitations

According to Halliday, there are three kinds of grammatical metaphors. Not only interpersonal grammatical metaphors have influences on texts but also the other two kinds of grammatical metaphors affect the text. Thus, it is essential to conduct deep researches on ideational metaphors and textual metaphors. However, this article only analyzes the interpersonal grammatical metaphors. The other two metaphors are not analyzed. In order to have systematic understandings of factors that influence English reading comprehension, further researches need to be conducted.

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