



An Analysis of the Interpersonal Functions of Self-Projection Based on Systemic Functional Linguistics

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Abstract

Self-projection belongs to the projection system of semantic category. Based on the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, this paper interprets the interpersonal functions of self-projection. Firstly, it gives an introduction to the types of self-projection from transitive process and ‘the exchanged’, and then discusses the multi-dimensional interpersonal functions of self-projection from Modal and Mood system. This analysis indicates that self-projection in Modal category follows polite principle and represents such interpersonal functions as judgment, evaluation or intersubjectivity in an explicit/implicit way, while self-projection in Mood category follows desirability principle and performs the interpersonal functions including question, command or statement from rank-scale and delicacy scale through declarative mood variants. It is hoped to provide a different perspective and entry point to effectively deconstruct and construct the interpersonal interaction based on the speaker’s point of view.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Self-Projection, Interpersonal Function, Interpersonal Interaction, Systemic Functional Linguistics

1. Introduction

Projection refers to “the logical-semantic relationship whereby a clause comes to function not as a direct representation of (non-linguistic) experience but as a

representation of a (linguistic) representation [1]”. The term ‘self-projection’ was first proposed by Thompson [2] and its function is defined as “...the use of ‘self-projection’ to make clear to your hearer your interpersonal purpose in saying something”, clarifying its interpersonal orientation.

As for this linguistic phenomenon of self-projection, a clear and unified definition has not been reached, and other terms such as *parenthetical verbs* [3], *engagement resource* [4], *private verbs* [5], *hedges* [6] have been diversely employed to illustrate this phenomenon. There have been different interpretations on its functions as well. Palmer [7] argued that some first-person verbs, as *I think that is a good idea* is an expression of the speaker’s cognitive judgment, and its plural form *we* is used by the speaker as a potential reader or a member of a group to narrow the distance between the speaker and the reader so as to establish a psychological alliance. Peng Jianwu [8] interpreted ‘*I think*’ from a pragmatic perspective as the result of pragmatic habituation and pragmatic grammaticalization, pointing out that “the use of its plural rather than singular form is considered to represent a tone of humility”. Li Zhanzi [9] analyzed the interpersonal meaning of ‘*I think*’ in academic discourse from the perspective of modality; Zeng Lei [10] discussed the function of “self-projection” in academic discourse from projecting perspective, and argued that the complexity of the sentence structure of “self-projection” stems from ideational metaphor, which increases its potential meaning. These previous studies have revealed the interpersonal potential of self-projection from different perspectives and dimensions. However, there are still some deficiencies in the following aspects: Firstly, there is a lack of detailed investigation of other transitivity processes other than psychological cognitive processes, especially the differences within psychological processes; Secondly, there has little attention been on propositional self-projection compared with propositional one; Thirdly, the research on the language phenomena of “self-reference” is generally scattered with various terms, which may lead to conceptual barriers and weaken a systematic cognition of its essence. Although Thompson defined this language phenomenon as “self-projection” to clarify its interpersonal value, he gave no further systematic analysis.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) by Halliday focuses on three meta-functions of English language with ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function, among of which interpersonal function is defined as a means of making information exchange among different people with a variety of interpersonal purposes. The term ‘projection’ was first put forward by Halliday in 1985 who views projection as a way for people to think or talk about the subjective or objective experience world around us and offers a systematic grammatical description of projection, thus becoming the theoretical framework of this paper. However, little attention has been given to the interpersonal meaning of projection in Systemic Functional Linguistics, self-projection in particular. In fact, self-projection has been widely used and played an important role in daily communication. So far, although there has been a lot of researches about this

phenomenon under the universal name of “self-reference”, the interpersonal function of self-projection is needed to be further systematically explored with more interpersonal aspects into consideration. As a result, based on Systemic Functional Linguistics and puts this “self-reference” phenomenon under the category of “self-projection”, this study attempt to makes a deeper and more systematic analysis on the interpersonal functions of this “self-reference” phenomenon, with the aim to reveal its diverse and complex interpersonal representation potential, and provide a different perspective and entry point for the effective deconstruction and construction of interpersonal interaction based on the speaker’s point of view, enriching the research on the interpersonal interaction of academic discourse.

2. The Types of Self-Projection

2.1. Syntactic Types of Self-Projection

This part analyzes the types of self-projection based on the perspective of transitivity process. Systemic Functional Linguistics takes language as the basis of human experience and the transitivity system construes the world of experience into a manageable set of Process Types. Therefore, “the transitivity system is the grammar of experience [11]”. Transitivity system mainly consists of six categories: relational process, mental process, verbal process, existential process, material process and behavioural process. Different transitivity processes constitute corresponding types of self-projection. Generally, the types of transitivity processes involved in self-projection mainly include the following three types.

1) Self-projection in mental process. Mental process refers to the process of “sensing”, including the clauses expressing emotion, cognition and perception, which is composed of “Senser+ Process + Phenomenon”. Self-projection in mental process may be divided into two types: mental-cognition and mental-emotion. self-projection in mental cognitive process, for example, can be shown as *I think/I believe/I guess/I propose/I wonder/I reckon/I expect/I image that...*; while self-projection of mental emotive process is like *I regret/I rejoice that...* Self-projection in both mental process is hypotaxis, however, there are many differences between them shown in **Table 1**.

I believe’ and *I regret*’ in **Table 1** are respectively the example of self-projection in mental cognitive process and mental emotive process. The differences between them are chiefly embodied in the following aspects: a) In terms of grammatical and semantic units. In the first example, the projected clause *‘he is right’* is projected by *‘I believe’*, which is the speaker’s personal subjective cognition. The two clauses constitute a clause complex, and they are in the category of “sequence” in semantic units; while in the second example, the projected clause *‘that he failed to pass the exam’* is a pre-existing objective ‘fact’ instead of projecting by *‘I regret’*, which triggers the emotive projection of ‘I’, resulting in the speaker’s emotive experience. In such case, the proposition clause (*he is right*) is

Table 1. The comparison of syntactic differences of self-projection between mental-cognition and mental-emotion.

A clause complex—Sequence		
I	believe	she is right
Senser	Process(mental-cognition)	Meta-phenomenon
	Projecting clause	Projected clause (an idea) Rank-scale: a clause
α	—————▶ β	
A simple clause—Figure		
I	regret	that she failed to pass the exam
Sensor	Process (mental-emotion)	Phenomenon
		Projected clause (a fact) Rank-scale: a nominal group

nominalized into a nominal phrase to constitute a simple clause, so it belongs to the category of “*figure*” in semantic unit. b) In terms of the content of the projected clause. The former is “*an idea*” and “*meta-phenomenon*” in the secondary semantic level, while the latter is “*an emotion*” and “*phenomenon*” of perception. c) In terms of the perspective of grammatical metaphor, self-projection clauses in mental cognitive process shows the characteristics of interpersonal metaphor, while self-projection clauses in mental emotive process embody the characteristics of ideational metaphor, taking on a reverse transfer dimensions of “bottom-up” and “top-down” respectively in rank-scale. These differences certainly have great contribution to the effective construe of the author’s interpersonal stance as well as decoding mode in academic discourse.

2) Self-projection in relational process. Relational process refers to the process of “being”, composed of “Carrier + Process + Attributive”. Self-projection in relational process is essentially homologous with mental process. Exactly, it is a variant of mental process and can also be divided into two types, corresponding to the mental cognitive and mental emotive processes respectively. Two examples are as follows:

- (1) *I’m sure/certain* he will come tonight.
- (2) *I’m delighted/surprised* that I can get the nice present.

The two cases are both relational process. In example (1) the self-projection process is presented by *I’m sure/certain*’ expressing the “degree of certainty”, which is homologous with mental cognition; while in example (2) the self-projection process is shown by *I’m delighted/surprised*’ expressing “emotion or feeling”, which is homologous with mental emotive process used to emphasize that it is *the fact*, namely, the projected clause usually guided by that clause that triggers the emotive experience. In this case, this *‘fact’ clause* is regarded as a semantic phenomenon and constructed as an independent proposition in the semantic domain, which may usually be converted with *‘please’* class. For instance, example (2)

may be converted into “*that I can get the nice present delights/pleases me*”. This helps us to get a deeper insight into the different variants of self-projection clauses and their internal relations and transformation pattern, thus providing more choice space for appropriate use of different variants to meet the rich and diverse interpersonal interaction.

3) self-projection in verbal process. Verbal process refers to the process of “saying”, composed of “Sayer+ process + Verbiage”. In this clause complex, “only the primary clause is a ‘verbal’ one, the other may be a process type of any kind” [1]. Relatively, self-projection in verbal process is much less than in mental one, like “*I promise/I say...*”, this is because such projection clauses are more colloquial and another may be that the projector ‘I’ is often used to highlight the speaker’s personally subjective ‘opinion’, which is somewhat contradicted with the persuasive purpose achieved by “objectivity” in academic discourse.

2.2. Semantic Types of Self-Projection Based on “The Exchanged”

This part analyzes the types of self-projection from the dimension of ‘the exchanged’ which can be divided into the self-projection of a proposition or a proposal. According to Systemic Functional Linguistics, the form of ‘the exchanged’ is defined as Proposition and Proposal, “the former refers to taking ‘information’ as the exchanged, something construed by language itself and is a semiotic phenomenon” [12], while the latter refers to employ ‘goods/services’ as the exchanged, a non-semiotic phenomenon in material reality independent from language. The representation of ‘the exchanged’ as ‘information’ is realized by a finite clause termed as a ‘proposition’. All the examples listed above are proposition clauses, the projected clauses of this kind are often an indication of the degree of certainty. In contrast, the representation of ‘the exchanged’ as ‘goods/services’ may be realized by a finite or a perfective non-finite clause termed as a ‘proposal’ with “unrealistic meaning”. Noticeably, when a proposal is embodied by a finite clause, it often appears together with a modulated operator as *should* in example (3) to indicate the actions that will or have not happened. The self-projection of a proposal generally co-occurs with a non-finite clause as in examples (4)-(6) with an addressee to carry out the proposal as “you” in examples (3), (6) and “him” in example (5).

(3) *I think* you should hand in your English paper right away.

(4) *I hope* to go to America next year.

(5) *I tell* him to close the door.

(6) *I’m willing* to give you a hand.

The self-projection of a proposal can also be realized respectively by a mental, verbal or relational process. A self-projection composed of non-finite clauses is termed as projecting verb complex structure, different from the projecting clause complex structure composed of a finite clause often guided by *that*. As far as hypotactic projection is concerned, in a projecting verb complex structure, the primary meaning is embodied by the first verb and according to Thompson [2],

the function of the first component is to modify, explain and supplement the “event” represented by the second component from a certain aspect. In terms of self-projection of a verb clause complex, the first component(verb) is the major component while the second one is a minor one. That’s because the first projecting component is a verb of mental or verbal process, and the second component is mentalized or verbalized by it shown as $\alpha^{\wedge}\beta$, which is fundamentally different from hypotactic expansion with the first verb indicating primary meaning shown as $\beta^{\wedge}\alpha$. To distinguish a propositional self-projection from a proposal one is of great significance to clearly encode or decode the speaker’s intention.

3. Analysis on the Interpersonal Function of Self-Projection

According to the “realization” relationship between semantics and grammar in Systemic Functional Linguistics, this part will examine the interpersonal functions of self-projection based on Modality and Mood systems respectively.

3.1. Analysis Based on Modality System

According to Systemic Functional Linguistics, modality is composed of modalization and modulation, the former known as cognitive modality refers to the clauses embodied in the form of propositions including probability and usuality, while the latter known as responsibility modality refers to the clauses embodied in the form of proposals including inclination and obligation.

3.1.1. Analysis on the Interpersonal Functions of Self-Projection in a Finite Clause

The examples are as follows:

- (7a) I think it is going to rain. (a proposition probability)
 (8a) I think he should finish it at once. (a proposal obligation)

The two instances above are both self-projection of finite clauses, however, the difference of ‘the exchanged’ leads to different interpersonal functions ‘*I think*’ carries, a analysis of example. In (7a), ‘the exchanged’ belongs to the propositional information (*it is going to rain*), ‘*I think*’ is used to express the uncertainty about the truth value of the proposition. There are two explanations for this uncertainty. On one hand, due to the limitation of human cognitive capability, people often express their uncertainty when expressing their views on the objective world. Under this circumstance, ‘*I think*’ conveys modality meaning—a cognitive judgment of “probability”, which is equivalent to a cognitive modal adjunct like *perhaps/probability*. On the other hand, the speaker selects ‘*I think*’ for his/her pragmatic purpose to allow the reader to clearly trace the source of evaluation and indicate speaker’s willingness to be responsible for the validity of this assertion.

What’s more, through the projector ‘*T*’ and a modality verb with low value as ‘*think*’, enabling the speaker to highlight his personal subjective point of view, indicating that he is willing to make further negotiation with others about the proposition, listen to or invite other voices to participate in the dialogue, so as to

expand communication space with different voices. The self-projection clause in example (7) reflects the speaker's explicitly subjective interpersonal orientation, and it also has its corresponding representation of explicitly objective interpersonal as in example (7b):

(7b) It likely that it is going to rain.

In (7b) the speaker chooses *'it like'* instead of *'I think'* to hide or blur the evaluator and reduce the visibility of the speaker. The ideational semantic resource *'it'* as a participant keeps a certain distance between the evaluation and the speaker, contributing to enhancing the 'objective effect', which is the primary reason for the extensive use of this construction in academic discourse.

Now let's turn to example (8a). In this example, 'the exchanged' is a proposal—requiring an addressee to perform a certain action, the projector *'I'* constructs a clear intersubjectivity and implicit dialogue relationship by selecting the modal operator (*should*) to require the addressee (*he*) to undertake obligations or execute a command (*finish it now*); On the other hand, the low modal value 'think' eases the tone to a certain extent, so as to reduce the pressure on the addressee to implement a proposal, making it more pleasant to accept the proposal. In this sense, self-projection clauses functions as regulating or correcting the relationship between subjects. This strategy is particularly important and effective for trying to change others opinion or action, persuading addressee involved to take a specific action just as the speaker hopes to. Similarly, example (8a) also has its corresponding explicitly objective representation as follows:

(8b) It's supposed/expected that she should finish it now.

By concealing the agent, the explicitly objective representation would enable the addressee to accept that this is an objective requirement, thus reducing the risk that the speaker's proposal may be rejected and lose face, meanwhile, making the addressee to implement the proposal with pleasure. The self-projection in proposal category with explicitly objective orientation has become a frequently used pragmatic strategy in interpersonal communication, however, pitifully, its interpersonal function has not been fully recognized and explored from both awareness and theoretical levels.

3.1.2. Analysis of the Interpersonal Functions of Self-Projection in Infinite Clauses

As mentioned above, self-projection of infinitive clauses belongs to the category of projective verb complex. The first verb carries primary semantic and plays a leading role, clarifying and emphasizing the type of agent and process. When the proposal is realized by an infinite clause, it is mainly projected by means of mental process of *hope* category (hope, desire, fear, etc.), shown as the example (4) (6) above. The self-projection of hope category in a proposal is endowed with different interpersonal functions in terms of "with or without the addressee": if there is no addressee like example (15), it indicates that the speaker will perform the proposal by himself, usually implementing "offer" speech function; and if there is an addressee like example (16), it shows that the addressee will carry out

the proposal, performing “command” speech function, and the intersubjectivity is well constructed. It is worth noting that the addressee of hope category belongs to the projected content and so it cannot be exemplified, which is in contrast to the addressee in verbal process shown as example (17) belonging to the projected content and can be exemplified.

(9) I want to leave now. (a proposal inclination)

(10) ||| I want || him to leave now |||. (a proposal obligation)

(11) ||| I promise him || to leave now. |||

Halliday & Matthiessen [1] holds that there is a systematically semantic gap in modality orientation, and there is no explicitly subjective expression with respect for usuality and inclination. However, the proposal self-projection represented by an infinitive clause reveals that there are explicitly subjective expressions in both usuality and inclination, and their modal meaning is mainly reflected by the first verb. For instance, explicitly subjective “*inclination*” is reflected in “*I’m willing*” in example (6); The explicitly subjective “*usuality*” is embodied with “*I tend to*” in the clause “*I tend to get up early in the morning*”. Generally speaking, the proposal self-projection composed of infinitive clauses is less used in written discourse, a primary reason may be that it is improper for the author to give “command” to readers. Due to the persuasiveness of academic discourses, the author is always pursuing an “objective” construction focusing on “proposition information”.

3.2. Analysis of the Interpersonal Functions Based on Mood System

Mood system mainly includes declarative mood, interrogative mood and imperative mood. Mood system is closely related to speech function. Speech functions include statement, offer, command and question. In discourse communication, people usually act as the speech role of “giving” or “demanding”, exchanging “information or goods/services”. Generally speaking, declarative mood performs the speech function of ‘statement’ (e.g. *we’re nearly there*); interrogative mood implements the speech function of “question” (e.g. *would you like some drink?*); imperative mood carries the speech function of ‘command’ (e.g. *pass me the salt*) and the speech function of “offer” can be realized by three types of moods mentioned above. However, due to the multi-stratums and multi-functions in language system, people tend to choose alternatives to express the same semantics. For example, when expressing “command” speech function of “*open the door*”, usually imperative mood is the first choice, however, other moods such as interrogative mood “*could you open the door?*” or declarative mood “*I want you to open the door*” may be widely employed as well to convey the same meaning.

3.2.1. Analysis of Self-Projection Based on Mood Metaphor

Generally, one speech function can be embodied by different mood variants, but self-projection belongs to hypotactic reporting, its speech function can only be realized by declarative mood. Projecting verbs play a key role in the transfor-

mation from other types of mood to declarative mood. By choosing some special projecting verbs, a quoted projection can be transformed into a reported one, so as to make the implicit speech function or receiver explicit shown as the following examples:

(12) “Was his sister here?” *I asked* whether his little sister was there.

quoting interrogative mood-question reporting declarative mood-question

(13) “Stay here.” *I told* his little sister to stay there.

quoting imperative mood-command reporting declarative mood-command

Through mood metaphor, the interrogative mood and imperative mood are both transformed into declarative mood to perform the corresponding speech function, and the key to this transformation available is due to the projecting verb chosen by the speaker. The projecting verbs in these two examples respectively make the implicit speech function explicit: the example (12) illustrates “demanding information” through “ask”, and example (13) illustrates a proposal of “demanding goods/services” through “told”, in this way can the implicit receiver (*his little sister*) in the original sentence become explicit and the person executing the proposal can also be determined. It should be noted that one speech function can be realized by different mood variants, similarly, one type of mood may perform different speech functions with the help of certain projecting verbs typically represented by “ask, tell” with *ask* mainly performing the speech function of ‘command or question’ (example 12), and *tell* mainly the speech function of ‘statement, offer or command’ (example 14-16). Declarative mood variants have created great space for the metaphorical embodiment of self-projection in mood category, offering its richer and diverse means to represent speech functions.

(14) *I tell* you his little sister was there.

(15) *I would like to tell* his little sister what she will do next.

(16) *I ask/told* his little sister to stay there.

3.2.2. Analysis of Self-Projection Based on Rank-Scale

As a complex of form and semantic variants, mood metaphor carries high interpersonal functions. The metaphorical manifestations of self-projection in mood category is mainly reflected rank-scale and its indirective utterance. According to Leech’s (1983) [13] concept of pragmatic hierarchy, the more indirect the utterance, the higher the degree of politeness. See the following examples:

(17a) *Tell me* what it means.

(17b) *I would like you to tell* me what it means.

(17c) *I wonder if you could tell* me what it means.

Example (17a) is a typical representation of the “command” speech function performed by imperative mood, and the examples (17b)-(17c) are metaphorical variants of different scales of self-projection in mood domain, all carrying out the “command” speech function. The wording from (17a) to (17c) is becoming more and more indirect, and the degree of politeness is gradually increasing. In

Example (17c) there is the furthest distance between meaning and its wording, employing the most implicit form to express the highest degree of politeness. As far as rank-scale is concerned, different mood variants of self-projection presenting “upgrading”, namely, from down to up. Metaphorical variants create a greater semiotic distance between meaning and wording, and this enacts a greater social distance between speaker and addressee [1]. The rank-scale is directly proportional to the politeness degree. The higher the rank-scale is, the more indirect the utterance is, and the higher the politeness degree is, which reflects the degree of intimacy, identity or status between interactants. The metaphor of mood reflects the politeness principle followed in interpersonal communication. As a frequently used and efficient pragmatic strategy, it provides more choices for self-projection to deal with interpersonal interactions in different contexts.

3.2.3. Analysis of Self-Projection Based on Delicacy Scale

The metaphor variants of declarative mood of self-projection may also reflect subtler interpersonal meaning through different delicacy scale. It represents the degree of the differences or details of a category, not only making the differences of semantics more and more accurate, but also representing a relationship of interdependency [14].

Grammatically, delicacy scale is reflected in the continuous increase of vocabulary density. Through the syntagmatic expansion of the wording, the interpersonal function of self-projection clauses is becoming richer and more diverse. Delicacy scale in English mainly manifested by interpersonal adjuncts to convey interpersonal functions shown as the following two examples.

(18) *I would strongly advise* you to pay a visit to your doctor in the very near future.

(19) I *personally think* the president committed impeachable offences.

The self-projection clause in two examples above are added to two adjuncts ‘*strongly, personally*’ respectively in delicacy scale, both function as emphasis, but they perform different interpersonal functions. The former aims to strengthen the mood, expressing the speaker’s strong expectation that the addressee will implement his proposal, and attempting to put more pressure on the addressee; while the latter aims to highlight the speaker’s willingness to be responsible for the effectiveness of the information proposed. By emphasizing that this is only a personal view, the speaker not only expresses his interpersonal stance of taking full responsibility for the proposition, but also reduces the possible suspicions from potential readers and thus reducing the interpersonal risk of being criticized. The analysis of examples of (29)-(31) shows that the interpersonal function potential of self-projection is effectively enhanced and enriched by adding the delicacy scale containing different interpersonal functional components. The self-projection of mood system reflects the principle of “desirability” followed in communication and desirability is the chief semantic-driven factor for mood metaphor [15].

4. Conclusions

Based on Systemic Functional Linguistics with focuses on interpersonal functions, this paper puts the language phenomenon of “self-reference” under the category of “self-projection” for re-examination in order to break through the conceptual barriers between different terms and enhance the power of description and explanation for such phenomenon, especially its interpersonal function potential. It is revealed that self-projection in modality category follows the politeness principle and represents such interpersonal functions as judgment, evaluation and intersubjectivity in an explicit or implicit way; while self-projection in mood category follows the desirability principle and performs interpersonal functions including question, command and statement from rank-scale and delicacy scale by means of metaphor variants of declarative mood. This analysis shows that self-projection is an effective rhetorical mechanism and pragmatic strategy for the speaker to express his/her subjective or objective interpersonal orientation, and regulate or modify the relationship among interactants to construct a dialogic discourse.

The analysis of self-projection in this paper may offer a different perspective for language teaching on such kind of language phenomenon under the name of ‘self-reference’. In traditional language teaching, self-projection tends to be viewed as one kind of language reports handled in the way there is a corresponding shift away from mechanical transformation of direct to indirect speech with great focus on its structure as well as literal meaning, neglecting its interpersonal functions. This leads to the fact that the learners often have no idea about how to make good use of self-projection resources to appropriately express their judgment or evaluation, make critical comment or take a rational stance on other people’s opinions or research work. Training in the understanding and use of self-projection in academic text is an important part of courses in English for Academic Purposes, which is of great help for the learners to improve their ability to master this strategy and establish a successful interpersonal relationship in their particular academic field. The analysis of this paper could serve as an entry point for a deeper insight into this kind of language phenomenon, improve the effective deconstruction and construction of interpersonal interaction based on the speaker’s point of view, and enrich the research on the interpersonal characteristics in academic discourse. Clearly, more experimental work needs to be done based on this paper to testify the validity of the theoretical analysis and gain more workable skills or strategies suitable for the learners.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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