

# A Brief Analysis of the Interpersonal Meaning in English Resignation Letters

## -- A Systemic Functional Approach

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### Abstract

Language is used by people not only to describe the world around them, but also to express their viewpoints and to elicit or change others' opinions and behavior as well as to interact with each other in order to establish and maintain relations with them. This function is termed as interpersonal meaning. Interpersonal meaning is an important research topic in linguistic studies. It is a term from Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, serving to establish and maintain relations. As Halliday(1994) points out, people use language to set up and keep interpersonal relationship, to influence others' behavior, or to try to change others' point of view, etc. Resignation letter, as a special type of writing and common in today's high-rate job-hopping society, is quite typical in showing and displaying interpersonal meaning, and thus deserves efforts to explore. This thesis sets out to make a brief study of interpersonal meaning in a corpus of English resignation letters based on the theoretical framework of Halliday's systemic functional grammar. Twenty English resignation letter templates are selected. Under Halliday's framework, Mood and Modality in resignation letters will be scrutinized. To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, both quantitative and qualitative analysis are employed so as to examine how and to what extent English resignation letters are represented from the perspective of interpersonal function. Through the analysis and discussion, it's found that in resignation letters there're more declaratives than imperative sentences, and more modulization than modalization. Declarative sentences reflect the employee's intention and plan. Imperatives display the implicitness and pity of leaving. Modalization and modulization express the gratefulness and wishes of the writer to the company and colleagues. In a word, it's found in writing English resignation letters all devices are employed by the employee in order to influence the employer (reader)'s opinion or impression upon the leaver, and ultimately shows understanding to the leaving and accept the resignation letter.

### Keywords

Resignation Letter; Personal Meaning; Systematic Functional Grammar; Mood; Modality.

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, job-hopping is a common phenomenon to the young people in such a fast-changing world. Having an internship in HR department for several months, the author of this paper gets to be familiar with the procedures from recruiting to resigning of a staff. The letter of resignation, or resignation letter, as an essential and indispensable part when leaving a position, is a typical type of writing and of legal effect. This paper tries to explore the resignation letter adopting Halliday's theory of interpersonal meaning in systemic functional grammar, from aspects of mood and modality respectively.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Halliday's Theory of IP Meaning

Halliday's systemic functional grammar can be grossed as a functional-semantic theory of language (Eggins&Slade, 1997:48). It is functional in that the way language as a whole and individual text is constructed is determined by the functions that they serve in social life. Halliday claims that all languages we use are organized around three main kinds of meanings, namely ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning. The explanation of three meta-functional meaning is as follows:

- (1) Ideational meaning is the one about the world and the expression about the experience;
- (2) Interpersonal meaning is about the roles and relationship;
- (3) Textual meaning involves the messages.

Halliday does not investigate language with isolated view, but focuses on the relation between language and context. The context of situation consists of three register variables: field (activity or topic focus), mode (extent and type of feedback possible) and tenor (roles and role relationships). These three variables of context of situation can be realized through the lexico-grammatical units of language system: Transitivity, Theme, Mood and Modality systems respectively. The specific correlation can be illustrated clearly by Table 1:

**Table 1.** The correlation of context of situation, semantics, lexico-grammatical structure

Context of situation	Semantics	Lexico-grammatical structure
Field	Ideational meaning	Transitivity
Tenor	Interpersonal meaning	Mood, Modality
Mode	Textual meaning	Theme

### 2.2. Basic Aspects of IP Meaning

#### 2.2.1. Mood

Interpersonal meaning is a participating function of language, by which the speaker makes himself or herself involved in a specific context to show his or her attitude and judgment, so as to influence others' attitude and behavior. This function involves role relationship with situation, including communicative role relationship, namely the relationship between the speaker and the listener, and the writer and the reader.

**Table 2.** Speech roles and speech function

Commodity exchanged	(a) goods & services	(b) information
Role in exchange		
Giving	Offer	Statement
Demanding	Command	Question

In the process of intercommunication, there are a lot of different roles like stating one's own opinion, raising question, giving order, making instruction, or showing one's emotion. The speaker usually would shift their statements among these roles. No matter how many different roles there are, there are only two basic tasks: giving and demanding: the speaker gives something to the listener or demand something from the listener. In this dimension, "giving" requires the listener to receive; at the same time, "demanding" requires the listener to obey.

In order to interact, we must also have something to exchange. The commodity being exchanged may be either (i) goods-&-services (tangible commodities or activities) or (ii) information (an intangible, purely verbal commodity). Taking roles in speech and commodity exchanged into consideration, the speech functions can be divided into the following four types respectively: offer, command, statement and question. The correlation between speech roles and speech functions can be showed in the following table:

**2.2.1.1 Type of Mood Structure**

Among The four speech functions, command, statement, and question are associated with specific grammatical structures. Statements are most naturally expressed by declarative clauses; questions by interrogative clauses; commands by imperative clauses.

However, we cannot match 'offer' with any particular grammatical structures, since "language" is functioning simply as a means towards achieving what are essentially non-linguistic ends (Halliday 2000:70).

The equivalent types to most of these clauses can be found in Chinese, though sometimes they may differ in structure (Peng Xuanwei 2000:136).

**2.2.1.2 Interpersonal Metaphor of Mood**

As mentioned above, every speech function is realized by responding grammatical structure. However, this is not fixed prescriptive rules, but the description of typical situations. In real-life situation, there are many non-typical situations. Those non-typical Mood choices are called by Halliday "interpersonal metaphor of Mood".

Usually, we demand information by the structure of interrogative, but we can also adopt declarative to raise a question. For example, "I wonder if you mind me smoking".

The imperative Mood is the typical way to express command, but command can also realized by modulated interrogative Mood, which frequently takes place. For instance, "Do you mind passing the salt to me?" Besides, the declarative Mood is also used to express the speech function of command, such as "I hope you will read the books."

Typically, the modulated interrogative Mood responds to offer, while offer can also be expressed by imperatives or declaratives. For example, "Take my book." Or "The book is on the table."

Besides, statements can be realized by tagged declaratives instead of the typical declaratives. For instance, "This book is given by the duke, isn't it?"

We can summarize the discussion above as the following table:

**Table 3.** Typical and non-typical Mood structures of four speech functions

Speech function Typical	Mood structure	Non-Typical Mood structure
command	imperative mood	modulated interrogative and declarative mood
offer	modulated interrogative mood	imperative and declarative mood
statement	declarative mood	tagged declarative mood
question	interrogative mood	modulated declarative mood

**2.2.2. Modality**

Halliday(2000) defines Modality as a representation of the standing point of the speaker either 'on validity of the assertion or on the rights and wrongs of the proposal'. In other words, it is a range of different ways in which speakers can temper or qualify their messages (Eggin and

Slade, 1997). Modality can be classified into modalization and modularization by the different exchanged content in the message. (Halliday, 2000)

When the exchanged is information, the clause is termed as proposition. In the proposition, polarity is represented as positive and negative poles. Between positive and negative pole, there are two kinds of intermediate possibilities: (i) degree of probability such as possibly/probably/certainly; and (ii) degree of usuality like sometimes/usually/always. Both probability and usuality can be expressed in the same three ways: (a) by a finite modal operator in the verbal group, e.g. that will be John, since he will sit there all day; (b) by a Mood adjunct of probability or usuality, e.g. that's probably John, since he usually sits there all day; (c) by both together, e.g. that will probably be John, since John will usually sit there all day.

When the exchanged is goods and service, the clause is referred to as proposal. In a proposal, there are also the positive and negative poles, and two kinds of intermediate possibilities: (i) in a command, the intermediate points represent degrees of obligation such as allowed to/supposed to/required to; (ii) in an offer, they represent degrees of inclination such as 'willing to/anxious to /determined to'. Both obligation and inclination can be expressed in either of the two ways: (i) by a finite modal operator, as in, I must win; (ii) by an expansion of the Predicator: (a) typically by a passive verb, e.g. You are supposed to work hard, (b) typically by an adjective, e.g. I am anxious to get this job.

The following table can summarize Modality system in the broad sense:

**Table 4.** Modalization and modulation

Commodity exchanged	Speech function		Type of intermediacy		Typical realization
information	proposition	statement question	modalization	probability (possible/ probable/ certain)	finite modal operator modal adjunct(both the above)
				Usuality (sometimes/ usually/ always)	
goods& services	proposal	command& offer	modulation	obligation (allowed/ supposed/ required) readiness:	finite modal operator passive verb predicator
				Inclination (willing/ keen/ determined)	
				readiness: ability	finite modal operator adjective predicator

As mentioned above, Modality is realized by modal verbal and adjunct as well as the expansion of predicator. However, this is not the only means to express, and the clause can also exert the same function. Halliday(2000) refers to this phenomenon as metaphor of Modality. "It probably is so" equals "I think it is so" in the modal sense. Instead of "I think", "it is probably so" plays the role of modal part.

### 3. A Brief Analysis of English Resignation Letter from the Functional Grammar Point of View

#### 3.1. Definition and Features of Resignation Letter

A letter of resignation is written to announce the author's intent to leave a position currently held, such as an office, employment or commission.

Such a letter will often take legal effect to terminate an appointment or employment, as notice under the relevant terms of the position; many appointments and contractual employments are terminable by unilateral notice, or advance notice of a specified period of time, with or without further conditions. The effective date or time of termination may be directly or indirectly fixed on delivery of a written letter or email, for the sake of clarity and record. In response, different arrangements may be made or agreed, such as an earlier effective date, or improved terms and conditions of appointment upon withdrawal of the letter.

For courtesy's sake, a letter of resignation may thank the employer for the pleasure of working under them and the opportunities and experience gained thereby, and also offer to assist with the transition by, for example, training the replacement. A more hostile letter may assert other sentiments or claims, particularly that the contract or terms of employment have been broken. In any case, the terms of the letter and its consequences may often be negotiated, either before or after delivery. (Wikipedia)

A resignation letter usually consists of five parts, namely title, salutation, body, conclusion, as well as signature and date. In the body part, it often consists of three parts, first of all, to raise up the request, second, to illustrate the reasons of resignation, as well as expressing the thankfulness or regrets to the employer, and then to illustrate any requirements(if any) and the willingness to resign, and the expectation of reply. A good resignation letter should be sincere, earnest, euphemistic, brief and non-critical.

#### 3.2. Mood in Resignation Letters

##### 3.2.1. Speech Roles in Resignation Letters

Since any resignation letter is interactive in essence, there are two main kinds of speech roles in recruitment advertisements: to give information and to demand action. The information given by the writer usually covers the request of resignation, the reasons of resigning and any requirements or wishes after the resignation. On the other hand, it also serves the function of demanding the reader to take action of accepting the resignation. In the whole texts, the writer makes every effort to persuade the reader to accept the resigning request and ask for understanding and forgiveness of the resigning.

##### 3.2.2. Information Giving

According to functional grammar, the most typical way of giving information is through declaratives. In our samples, a wealthy collection of examples can be found:

Eg1: *I hereby resign as CEO of Apple. (Steve Jobs)*

Eg2: *I am writing to inform you of my intention of withdrawing from my current position in this magazine.*

Eg3: *I have accepted an offer with another firm and have decided to tender my resignation as of today.*

Eg4: *I have allowed 30 days prior to my departure for assisting in the transition process.*

Eg5: *Thank you for your kind attention and would appreciate if you could let me have a reference letter before I leave.*

Eg6: *I have made some of the best friends of my life at Apple, and I thank you all for the many years of being able to work alongside you. (Steve Jobs)*

All the above selected examples are declaratives, while the information they transfer vary. Eg1 and Eg2 are often the first sentence of the body part, clear and to the point, showing the statement of one's decision of resigning from a certain position. Eg3 shows the reason behind the resignation. In Eg4, the employee states his/her willingness and availability of the job transition process. While in Eg5 and Eg6, the writer expresses his thankfulness and gratitude to the old employer.

Though declaratives play an irreplaceable role in giving information, the other types of Mood are also adopted to convey information. Some of imperatives in recruitment advertisements can also be identified to give information instead of demanding someone to do things. For instance,

Eg1: *Please accept this letter as formal notification that I am leaving my position with IBM on August 7.*

Eg2: *If I can be of any help during the transition, please let me know.*

In Eg1, the sentence serves as a request, as well as providing the information of the resignation and the date. Eg2 is another kind of imperative sentence, which shows the willingness of the employee to do the transition work, meaning "I can help during the transition" and in this stance, provides information instead of a command.

From the above analysis, it is found that declaratives take the key position to give information, but the types of Mood are diverse instead of being confined to declaratives.

### 3.2.3. Action Demanding

In resignation letters, the writer aims to demand a request of the reader, usually the employer, to accept his resignation and ask for understanding of this action. According to functional grammar, imperatives are the typical way to demand action. They are employed frequently in English resignation letters:

Eg1: *Please accept this letter as formal notification that I am leaving my position with IBM on August 7.*

Eg2: *Please let me know what to expect as far as my final work schedule, accrued vacation leave, and my employee benefits.*

In Eg1, the writer requests to resign the position, which is a typical demand for action. While in Eg2, the writer demands some information be provided, namely his/her work schedule, vacation leave and benefits. Both of these two examples perform the action of demanding. From our analysis, imperatives play an important role in motivating the readers to learn more about the company and persuading them to take action to apply for the positions. In fact, declaratives also serves the function. For example,

Eg3: *As far as my successor goes, I strongly recommend that we execute our succession plan and name Tim Cook as CEO of Apple. (Steve Jobs)*

Eg3 is a declarative sentence, but from it we can see the writer is recommending his successor of his position, which is a demand instead of statement.

## 3.3. Modality in Resignation Letters

Modality is an important means of realizing interpersonal meaning. In the preceding chapter, we have discussed about Modality which is divided into Modalization and Modulization. In the following subsections, we will illustrate how Modality system is employed from the two aspects. The distributions and frequencies of Modality in English resignation letters will be analyzed.

### 3.3.1. Realization of Modalization in Resignation Letters

In the previous chapter, we have defined modalization as the resources of indicating how likely the speaker regards a proposition to be true (probability) and how often a proposition is true (usuality). In our corpus, there are some linguistic resources to realizing probability:

Eg1: *I hope you will respect my position in this matter.*

Eg2: *I believe Apple's brightest and most innovative days are ahead of it. (Steve Jobs)*

The above samples are selected from English resignation letters, which mainly talk about the plan of the writer, and his/her wish to the company or colleagues he/she is about to leave from. The modalization resources appear as the form of modal verbal operators (will in Eg1), or interpersonal metaphor (believe in Eg2).

### 3.3.2. Realization of Modulation in English Resignation Letters

Modulation is concerned with proposal meaning to what degree one wants to demand (obligation) or offer (inclination). In resignation letters, the writer needs to raise the resigning request, his future wish as well as his benediction to the company and colleagues. Thus a wealthy collection of modulation resources can be found in both English resignation letters:

Eg1: *I want to express my gratitude for a rewarding professional association during my employment with HSBC.*

Eg2: *I hope you will respect my position in this matter.*

Eg3: *I would like to serve, if the Board sees fit, as Chairman of the Board, director and Apple employee. (Steve Jobs)*

Eg4: *However, I would like to join (new company name) as soon as possible. Therefore, if convenient, I would like to request that you waive my termination notice.*

Eg5: *I strongly recommend that we execute our succession plan and name Tim Cook as CEO of Apple.*

Eg6: *I wish you and the company all the best. I do hope our paths cross again in the future.*

Eg7: *I will be working for a local non-profit organization and look forward to the new direction of my career*

From the above examples, we can see both obligation (Eg 1-6) and inclination (Eg7) modulation are realized by the marks like modal verbal operators and auxiliary verbs.

## 4. Conclusion

Through the analysis and discussion, it's found that in resignation letters there're more declaratives than imperative sentences, and more modulization than modalization. Declarative sentences reflect the employee's intention and plan. Imperatives display the implicit and pity of leaving. Modalization and modulization express the gratefulness and wishes of the writer to the company and colleagues. In a word, it's found in writing English resignation letters all devices are employed by the employee in order to influence the employer (reader)'s opinion or impression upon the leaver, and ultimately shows understanding to the leaving and accept the resignation letter.

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