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INTERPERSONAL METAFUNCTION IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ENGLISH CONVERSATIONS: A HALLIDAYAN SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS APPROACH

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ABTRACT

Interpersonal meaning has been widely examined in academic writing, public speeches, and textbook dialogues. However, fewer studies have directly compared how speech functions and Mood are realized, both congruently and metaphorically, in a formal workplace interaction and an informal restaurant service encounter. This study addresses this gap by examining how interpersonal meaning is realized in formal and informal English conversations using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach. It examines the use of different speech functions and mood types, as well as the realization of meaning through congruent and metaphorical expressions in different interactional contexts. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method by analyzing clause structures from two written dialogues: a professional workplace meeting representing a formal setting and a restaurant ordering conversation representing a more informal service interaction. Each clause was analyzed in terms of Mood and Residue, classified according to speech functions, and organized into tables to identify the frequency of each structure. The findings show that declarative moods, which realize statements, are dominant in both contexts, indicating that information exchange is prominent in the two interactional settings. In the formal interaction, suggestions and proposals are frequently realized through modified declarative or interrogative structures rather than direct commands. In the restaurant interaction, questions, minor clauses, and elliptical expressions occur more frequently, while requests for food items are commonly realized through declarative expressions such as "I'd like…" and "I'll take…". Modality also functions as a resource for managing interpersonal influence and expressing degrees of inclination and possibility. Overall, the findings demonstrate that Mood, speech function, and tenor interact in shaping how participants exchange information and goods-and-services while negotiating interpersonal relationships, power, and social roles.
Keywords: *Interpersonal Metafunction, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Tenor.*

ABSTRAK

Makna interpersonal telah banyak dikaji dalam tulisan akademik, pidato publik, dan dialog buku teks. Namun, masih sedikit penelitian yang secara langsung membandingkan realisasi fungsi tuturan dan Mood, baik secara kongruen maupun metaforis, dalam interaksi kerja formal dan interaksi layanan restoran yang informal. Penelitian ini menjawab kesenjangan tersebut dengan mengkaji bagaimana makna interpersonal direalisasikan dalam percakapan bahasa Inggris formal dan informal melalui pendekatan Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Halliday. Penelitian ini menelaah penggunaan berbagai fungsi tuturan dan jenis Mood, serta realisasi makna melalui ungkapan kongruen dan metaforis dalam konteks interaksi yang berbeda. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan menganalisis struktur klausa dari dua dialog tertulis: rapat kerja profesional yang mewakili situasi formal dan percakapan pemesanan di restoran yang mewakili interaksi layanan yang lebih informal. Setiap klausa dianalisis berdasarkan unsur Mood dan Residue, diklasifikasikan menurut fungsi tuturan, dan disusun dalam tabel untuk mengidentifikasi frekuensi setiap struktur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Mood deklaratif, yang merealisasikan pernyataan, mendominasi kedua konteks, yang menandakan bahwa pertukaran informasi menonjol dalam kedua situasi interaksi

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tersebut. Dalam interaksi formal, saran dan usulan sering direalisasikan melalui struktur deklaratif atau interogatif yang dimodifikasi, bukan melalui perintah langsung. Dalam interaksi di restoran, pertanyaan, klausa minor, dan ungkapan elips lebih sering muncul, sedangkan permintaan makanan umumnya direalisasikan melalui ungkapan deklaratif seperti "I'd like…" dan "I'll take…". Modalitas juga berfungsi sebagai sumber daya untuk mengatur pengaruh interpersonal dan mengungkapkan tingkat kecenderungan serta kemungkinan. Secara keseluruhan, temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa Mood, fungsi tuturan, dan tenor saling berinteraksi dalam membentuk cara para partisipan bertukar informasi serta barang dan jasa sambil menegosiasikan hubungan interpersonal, kekuasaan, dan peran sosial.
Kata Kunci: Metafungsi Interpersonal, Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik, Tenor.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a means of representing experience; it is also a resource for enacting social relationships. In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Cheng (2024) and Luthfiyati et al. (2024) explain that language simultaneously fulfils three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The interpersonal metafunction concerns how speakers interact, express attitudes, and negotiate roles with one another (Cheng, 2024; Fadhillah & Rahmadina, 2021). Through this metafunction, speakers do not merely exchange information but also establish their identities, indicate social relationships, and negotiate authority and interpersonal roles during interaction. SFL therefore views language as a social semiotic system in which meaning is shaped by the context in which language is used (Cheng, 2024; Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024).

The interpersonal meaning is primarily conveyed through the Mood system. Mood allows speakers to take speech roles by providing or asking for information or goods and services. These roles produce four initiating speech functions: statement (S), question (Q), command (C), and offer (O), which are typically realized through declarative, interrogative, and imperative moods (Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024; Fadhillah & Rahmadina, 2021). Conversation is also a collaborative process rather than a sequence of separate actions. Each initiating move invites a corresponding responding move: acknowledgment of statement (AS), response to question (RSQ), response to command (ROC), and response to offer (ROO). Responding moves may support the initiating speaker or confront the initiating move, for example through agreement, answering, compliance, acceptance, disagreement, denial, refusal, or rejection (Haq et al., 2022; Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024). Examining both initiating and responding moves is therefore important for understanding how participants manage interaction and interpersonal relationships.

Mood choice is closely related to the social context of interaction. According to register theory, Tenor describes the relationship between participants in terms of power or status, contact or familiarity, and affective involvement (Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024). In formal situations, institutional roles and greater social distance may encourage speakers to use more careful, mitigated, or indirect expressions. In less formal situations, speakers may use more economical, spontaneous, and context-dependent forms. The distinction between formal and informal interaction, however, does not always correspond to close or distant relationships. In the informal conversation examined in this study, for example, the participants are a waiter and a customer who are strangers. Thus, the interaction is informal in its service setting and linguistic style but still involves some social distance. Comparing the two conversations can therefore show how the same interpersonal resources are realized under different interactional conditions.

Previous studies have demonstrated the relevance of interpersonal metafunction analysis in different types of texts. Fadhillah and Rahmadina (2021) examined interpersonal meaning in students' academic writing, while Yanto and Pravitasari (2023) investigated interpersonal meaning in spoken texts in an EFL textbook. Shekhani and Taha (2023) compared interpersonal meaning in entrepreneurs' public speeches in English and Central Kurdish. Widiastuti and Rahayuni (2024) analyzed mood and modality in motivational quotations and their Indonesian translations, and Simanjuntak et al. (2022) examined interpersonal meaning in Muniba Mazari's speech. More recently, Jannah et al. (2026) analyzed interpersonal metafunction in Anne Hathaway's speech. These studies show that Mood, speech function, and modality can be examined across different communicative contexts; however, a direct comparison of a workplace meeting and a restaurant service encounter remains useful.

The observed data in the present study demonstrate two different interactional conditions. The formal conversation is a workplace meeting involving four colleagues who

discuss a production report and the selection of a project leader. The informal conversation is a restaurant service encounter involving a waiter and a customer who negotiate an order for food and drinks. The data contain 19 analyzable clauses in the formal conversation and 24 clauses in the informal conversation. Declarative Mood is dominant in both conversations, while the restaurant exchange contains a wider range of interrogative, minor, and elliptical forms. Differences can also be observed in the realization of speech functions. For example, in the workplace meeting, the suggestion "Can we just ask someone from another department?" is realized through an interrogative form, while in the restaurant interaction, the customer uses declarative expressions such as "I'd like to see the menu" and "I'll take…" to express requests for goods and services. The waiter also uses a short expression such as "Dessert?" to ask about the customer's choice. These patterns provide an observable basis for examining how interpersonal meanings are realized through grammatical choices in different interactional settings.

The research problem is therefore concerned with how interpersonal meanings are realized through speech functions and Mood types in formal and informal English conversations and how these realizations relate to the interpersonal conditions of the interaction. Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: (1) What speech functions and Mood types are used in formal and informal English conversations? and (2) How are Mood types realized to express speech functions in the two contexts?

The second research question requires attention to congruent and metaphorical realization. A speech function is realized congruently when it is expressed through its typical Mood, such as a statement through a declarative or a question through an interrogative. A speech function is realized metaphorically when another Mood is used, such as a command or request expressed through an interrogative or declarative structure (Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024). This distinction is important because speakers do not always use the most direct grammatical form to perform an interpersonal function. In formal interaction, for example, a speaker may use an interrogative or declarative structure to make a proposal or request rather than using a direct imperative. Such choices can reduce the force of an expression and reflect the interpersonal conditions of the interaction.

Modality provides an additional resource for expressing interpersonal meaning. It consists of modalization, which concerns probability and usuality, and modulation, which concerns obligation and inclination. These forms can be expressed at low, median, or high values (Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024; Haq et al., 2022). In this study, modality is examined when it occurs in the data to identify how speakers express degrees of possibility, willingness, or interpersonal influence. Its interpretation is related to the tenor of the interaction, particularly the participants' power, contact, and affective involvement.

The analysis is guided by clear parameters. For the first research question, speech function is identified according to the type of exchange and the speech role, while Mood is identified from the grammatical structure of each clause. Declarative Mood generally places the Subject before the Finite, interrogative Mood places the Finite before the Subject in polar questions or uses a WH-element, and imperative Mood commonly lacks an explicit Subject and Finite or uses the base Predicator (Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024). For the second research question, each clause is analyzed into Mood, consisting of Subject and Finite, and Residue, consisting of Predicator, Complement, and Adjunct. The relationship between speech function and Mood is then classified as congruent or metaphorical. Where modality occurs, it is identified according to its type and value. The resulting patterns are interpreted in relation to Tenor, particularly power, contact, and affective involvement.

The study aims to identify the speech functions and Mood types used in formal and informal English conversations and to explain how Mood types are realized to convey those speech functions. The study is expected to contribute theoretically and practically.

Theoretically, it contributes to the understanding of interpersonal meaning in SFL by providing a comparative analysis of speech functions, Mood, congruent and metaphorical realization, and modality in two different spoken interactional contexts. Practically, the findings may help English learners and teachers recognize how speakers adjust grammatical choices according to social context and interpersonal relationships. The findings may also provide a foundation for future research on spoken interaction, interpersonal relationships, and the realization of interpersonal meaning in different contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section describes the methodological procedures used to examine how interpersonal meaning is enacted in two English conversations, namely Unfinished Meeting as the formal context, which consists of 19 clauses, and Order Food in the Restaurant as the informal context, which consists of 24 clauses. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in the interpersonal metafunction of the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework (Cheng, 2024; Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024), the study analyzes each conversation at the clause level to identify speech functions, mood types, and congruent and metaphorical realizations. The following subsections present the research design, the data and data sources, the data collection technique, and the data analysis procedure.

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design in the form of a mini research project. It aims to describe and interpret how interpersonal meanings are enacted in two English conversations, while frequencies are used only to support the description, for example to show the distribution of speech functions and mood types. The analysis draws on the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework (SFL), particularly the interpersonal metafunction (Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024; Cheng, 2024).

Data and Data Sources

The data consist of two written English dialogues taken from websites, each representing a different context. The formal conversation is Unfinished Meeting, a workplace meeting among four participants (Ben, Tom, Martha, and Jenny) who discuss a production report and the selection of a leader for a project, taken from Sederet.com (n.d.), whereas the informal conversation is Order Food in the Restaurant, an exchange between a waiter and a customer who orders food and drinks in a cafe, taken from Interaksi (2025).

Data Collection

To collect the data, the researchers first searched for English dialogues that represent formal and informal situations, then selected these two dialogues, and finally copied each one with its speaker labels. Since speech function and mood are realized at the clause level (Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024), each dialogue was divided into clauses, which became the unit of analysis, and every clause was numbered so that it could be traced during the analysis. Minor and elliptical clauses, such as greetings and short answers, were also included.

Data Analysis

The data were then analyzed using the interpersonal framework of SFL (Cheng, 2024; Luthfiyati et al., 2024). To answer the first research question, the speech function of each clause was identified based on the commodity exchanged (information or goods-and-services), the speech role (giving or demanding), and the orientation of the move in the exchange, namely initiating or responding. The combination of commodity and role yields four initiating speech functions: statement (S), question (Q), command (C), and offer (O). Responding moves were coded according to the initiating move they follow: acknowledgement of statement (AS), response to question (RSQ), response to command (ROC), and response to offer (ROO). Each responding move was further classified as

supporting (acknowledging, answering, complying, or accepting) or confronting (contradicting, disclaiming, refusing, or rejecting) (Haq et al., 2022). Together, these categories yield eight speech function elements. After that, the mood type of each clause was identified as declarative, interrogative (yes/no and WH-), imperative, or minor/elliptical, and the frequency and percentage of each speech function and mood type were tabulated for each conversation and compared across the two.

To answer the second research question, each speech function was subsequently matched with its mood type to determine whether the realization is congruent or incongruent (metaphorical). Realization is congruent when the typical pairing occurs, namely a statement with a declarative, a question with an interrogative, and a command with an imperative, while offers have no single typical mood and are usually realized through modulated interrogatives or declaratives expressing inclination (Cheng, 2024). In contrast, realization is incongruent when a speech function is expressed through a different mood, for example a command realized as a declarative (I'd like to see the menu) or as an interrogative (Can we just ask someone from another department?). These incongruent realizations were then classified and explained in terms of their interpersonal meaning, such as politeness, indirectness, or softening a demand. Finally, the patterns of congruent and incongruent realization in the two conversations were compared, with the results presented in tables and descriptive explanations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the analysis and discusses them in light of the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework and the variable of tenor. It is organized around the two research questions: the distribution of speech functions and mood types (RQ1), and the congruent and metaphorical realization of those functions (RQ2).

Conversation 1 is a workplace meeting among four colleagues (Ben, Tom, Martha, and Jenny), with Ben acting as chair, and it is treated as the formal context. Conversation 2 is a waiter–customer food-ordering exchange and is treated as the informal context. Conversation 2 is relaxed in style but is held between strangers, so it is a service encounter with some social distance.

RQ1: What speech functions and mood types are used in formal and informal English conversations?

The aim of the analysis addressing the first research question is to identify and map out types rather than to explain reasons. Consequently, the analysis is conducted at the clause level: each clause is labeled according to its speech function (statement, question, offer, command) and mood type (declarative, interrogative, imperative, minor/elliptical).

Table 1 Distribution of Speech Functions

Speech function	Formal	Informal
Statement	9 (47.4%)	12 (50.0%)
Question	2 (10.5%)	3 (12.5%)
Offer	1 (5.3%)	1 (4.2%)
Command	2 (10.5%)	3 (12.5%)
Responding moves	5 (26.3%)	5 (20.8%)

Table 2 Distribution of Mood Types

Mood type	Formal	Informal
Declarative	14 (73.7%)	12 (50.0%)
Interrogative	2 (10.5%)	4 (16.7%)

Mood type	Formal	Informal
Imperative	2 (10.5%)	3 (12.5%)
Minor	1 (5.3%)	3 (12.5%)
Elliptical	0 (0.0%)	2 (8.3%)

Formal conversation. Statement is the most frequent speech function and declarative is the dominant mood (73.7%). The participants mostly exchange information: reporting the production result (Last week we have met the sales demand), the failed voting (We did a voting yesterday), and the reason behind it (It is because no one want the position). Questions appear only twice, both from Tom, and both concern the agenda or procedure (Have you received a copy of last week production report?). Commands appear only twice, and both are inclusive let's forms (let's start the meeting..., let us move to other agenda) used to open and move the meeting forward. An offer appears once (I would like to apply to be the leader). Responding moves are mostly acknowledgements (That is good news, That is a good idea), which keep the exchange cooperative.

Informal conversation. Declarative is still the most frequent mood, but its share is lower (50.0%). The conversation is more varied: interrogative rises to 16.7%, imperative to 12.5%, and minor and elliptical clauses make up 20.8% (Sure, Great!, Good choice!, Dessert?). The exchange is transactional, so it is structured as demanding and giving goods and information. The waiter asks questions to collect the order (What's your drink?) and gives information about the menu (We have spaghetti, beef burger...). The customer gives information and demands goods. Responses are short evaluative minor clauses.

RQ2: How are mood types realized to express speech functions?

Following Cheng (2024) and Luthfiyati et al. (2024), a realization is congruent when the speech function takes its typical mood: statement as declarative, question as interrogative, and command as imperative. It is incongruent (metaphorical) when another mood realizes the function. Offer has no single typical mood (Cheng, 2024), so offers are normally realized through modulation, such as a declarative or an interrogative. For this reason, offers are listed in Table 3 together with the commands that are realized through a different mood.

Table 3 Incongruent and Modulated Realizations of Offers and Commands

Utterance	Function	Realized as
Formal		
I would like to apply to be the leader	Offer	Declarative
Can we just ask someone from other department?	Command	Interrogative
We can try again this time	Command	Declarative
Informal		
What can I get for you today?	Offer	Interrogative
I'd like to see the menu	Command (goods)	Declarative
I'll take grilled chicken with mushroom sauce	Command (goods)	Declarative

Formal conversation. Most of the meeting is congruent. Statements are realized by declaratives, questions by interrogatives, and commands by imperatives, and the responding moves are also declaratives. Incongruence is concentrated where the speakers make proposals or volunteer for a task, which are potentially face-threatening moves. Ben does not state his offer directly. He softens it with would like to. Tom turns his suggestion into a modulated question (Can we just...?). Jenny's suggestion is a declarative with can. This is the pattern described by Yanto and Pravitasari (2023), in which directives are transformed into modulated interrogatives or modulated declaratives so they do not seem coercive.

Informal conversation. Statements and questions are again realized congruently (What's the food selection?, What's your drink?, Dessert?, Your order will be ready in 10 minutes). Incongruence appears in the offer and command functions. The waiter offers service through a question (What can I get for you today?), not through a direct offer. The customer demands goods through declaratives (I'd like..., I'll take...), not through a bare imperative such as Show me the menu. The imperatives that do appear are ritual or minor: Please! and Enjoy!. Please! is added after the declarative, so the demand is made indirectly and the politeness marker follows it.

Declarative mood and statements as the dominant choice in both conversations

The results show that statements, realized congruently by declarative mood, are the most frequent speech function in both the formal meeting (47.4%) and the restaurant exchange (50.0%). This indicates that, regardless of the degree of formality, the main communicative purpose of both interactions is the exchange of information. In the meeting, participants report production results, explain a failed vote, and give reasons for it. In the restaurant, the waiter gives information about the menu and the customer states his or her order. This result is consistent with Haq et al. (2022) and Yanto and Pravitasari (2023), who found that declarative mood consistently dominates the utterances in conversation. It also supports the SFL perspective discussed by Cheng (2024) that giving information is the most basic and most frequently exercised speech role in everyday interaction.

Differences in the variety of mood types

Although declarative mood dominates both conversations, the formal meeting is considerably more declarative (73.7%) than the restaurant exchange (50.0%). The restaurant conversation shows a wider range of mood types, with more interrogative clauses (16.7% vs. 10.5%) and with minor and elliptical clauses (20.8%) that are almost absent from the meeting (5.3%). Two factors explain this difference. First, the meeting is information-centred: its participants discuss a report and a project in full clauses, and the chair asks only a few procedural questions. Second, the restaurant conversation is a transactional service encounter. It proceeds through quick question-and-answer sequences (What's your drink?, Dessert?), and responses are often short evaluative or confirming moves (Sure, Great!, Good choice!). Such minor and elliptical forms are possible because the participants share the immediate situational context, so the meaning does not need to be spelled out in full clauses. This is in line with Cheng (2024), who notes that spoken interaction relies heavily on shared context and economical forms.

Realization of commands and offers in the formal conversation

For RQ2, most clauses in the meeting are realized congruently: statements as declaratives and questions as interrogatives. Incongruence is concentrated in the functions that carry social risk, namely offers and directives. Ben's offer to become the leader is not stated directly but softened with the modulated declarative I would like to apply to be the leader. Tom's suggestion is turned into a modulated question (Can we just ask someone from other department?), so that a proposal is expressed as an inquiry and not as an instruction. Even the only two imperatives in the meeting are inclusive forms (let's start the meeting, let us move to other agenda), which present the chair's direction as a shared action rather than an order directed at others.

These patterns support the claim of Cheng (2024) that direct imperatives can sound dictatorial in formal settings. They also match Yanto and Pravitasari's (2023) finding that the avoidance of bare imperatives in formal interaction is a politeness strategy, in which commands are transformed into modulated interrogatives or declaratives. Metaphorical realization therefore allows the speakers to pursue their goals while protecting each other's face and handling the authority relations in the meeting with care.

Realization of commands and offers in the informal conversation

A similar pattern appears in the restaurant exchange, but with a different motivation. The waiter makes an offer of service through a question (What can I get for you today?) and not through a direct offer. The customer demands goods through declaratives (I'd like to see the menu, I'll take grilled chicken with mushroom sauce) rather than through bare imperatives such as Show me the menu. The imperatives that do occur are minor and ritual in nature (Please!, Enjoy!). These clauses are conventional service formulae and do not command the listener in the true sense.

This shows that an informal, relaxed style does not automatically mean the use of direct commands. Because the waiter and the customer are strangers, the conversation is better described as a service encounter with some social distance than as a conversation between close friends. The speakers are therefore still polite and indirect in demanding goods and services, while the overall tone remains easy and brief. This also explains why the informal conversation is not simply “more direct” than the formal one: the difference lies in the style (short, elliptical, transactional) more than in the removal of politeness.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, the two conversations show that interpersonal meaning is expressed through different speech functions and mood types according to the purpose and situation of the interaction. In the Unfinished Meeting conversation, declarative statements are used most frequently because the participants mainly exchange information, explain situations, and express their opinions during the meeting. Interrogative clauses are used to ask for information, while imperative clauses are used to direct the meeting, such as starting the discussion and moving to another agenda. An offer is also found when Ben expresses his willingness to become the leader of the AXL project.

In the Order Food in the Restaurant conversation, the use of speech functions is related to the interaction between the waiter and the customer. Statements are mainly used to provide information about the menu and the order, while questions are used to obtain information about food and drinks. Commands are used when the customer makes an order and when the waiter gives a direction, such as telling the customer to enjoy the meal. This shows that mood choices help the participants communicate effectively based on their roles in the situation.

The Mood and Residue analysis also demonstrates that the clauses are organized through grammatical elements such as Subject, Finite, Predicator, Complement, and Adjunct. These elements contribute to the formation of different mood structures, including declarative, interrogative, and imperative clauses. In both conversations, incongruent realization is concentrated in offers and commands, which speakers soften through modulated declaratives or interrogatives, and the informal conversation differs from the formal one more in brevity and ellipsis than in the absence of politeness. Overall, the analysis indicates that speech function and mood are closely connected to the communicative purpose and the tenor of each conversation. Therefore, the two conversations demonstrate how language choices construct interpersonal relationships and support communication in different social contexts.

This study is limited to two short written dialogues (19 and 24 clauses), so its findings are descriptive and cannot be generalized. Future research is suggested to analyze larger and more authentic spoken data and to examine modality systematically as part of the interpersonal analysis.

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