

# A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL MEANING IN THE JOB INTERVIEW SCENE OF THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates the interpersonal meaning of language in the job interview scene of The Pursuit of Happyness through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Centering on the speech functions statements, questions, offers, and commands and their realizations through various mood types, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach. The dialogue was transcribed and analyzed to uncover how linguistic choices construct social identity, negotiate authority, and convey interpersonal meanings within a formal, institutional context. The findings indicate that statements, predominantly realized through declarative moods, were the most frequent speech function, strategically used by Chris Gardner to demonstrate competence and credibility. In contrast, questions, generally realized through interrogatives, were mainly employed by the interviewers, reflecting institutional control and unequal power relations. Although less frequent, commands and offers played important roles in managing the flow of conversation and exerting subtle authority through indirect or polite expressions. The study shows that speech functions are intricately linked to mood structures and perform essential interpersonal roles such as managing face, expressing stance, and defining relational positions. The use of modality and mood adjuncts further enhances nuances of obligation, willingness, and uncertainty. These findings underscore the effectiveness of SFL as a framework for analyzing spoken discourse and reveal how language functions strategically in job interview contexts to shape interpersonal dynamics.

*Keywords: Interpersonal meaning, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Speech functions, Mood structures, Job interview discourse.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language serves not only as a medium for transmitting information but also as a dynamic instrument for constructing and maintaining social relationships. In interpersonal communication, lexical choices, tone, and grammatical patterns play crucial roles in shaping how individuals assume roles, negotiate authority, and convey attitudes (Hargie, 2021; Kartikasari et al., 2020; Torky & Ahmed, 2025). Systemic

Functional Linguistics (SFL), a framework developed by Michael Halliday, provides a comprehensive approach for examining these dimensions of meaning. Within SFL, the interpersonal metafunction specifically addresses how language facilitates social interaction through various speech functions statements, questions, offers, and commands (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2019; Sutikno et al., 2025). Drawing on this framework, the present study explores the interpersonal dimension of language in

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a notable cinematic context: the job interview sequence from *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Muludi & Adi, 2024).

Job interviews are inherently interpersonal events in which power dynamics, social roles, and expectations are negotiated through language (Ijam & Al-Ameedi, 2024). The context of a job interview typically places the interviewer in a position of authority while the interviewee adopts a more dependent or persuasive role. This asymmetry makes such interactions ideal for examining the ways in which speech functions are used strategically. In the scene analyzed, the protagonist, Chris Gardner, seeks to make a positive impression despite arriving late and appearing unprepared. The linguistic choices made by both Gardner and the interviewers serve as rich data for exploring how interpersonal meanings are constructed and managed in high-stakes institutional discourse (Gardner, 2018).

Within the interpersonal metafunction, speech functions are fundamental to the realization of interactive meaning. Halliday (2019) identifies four primary speech functions: statements, questions, offers, and commands, each associated with specific grammatical moods and interactional goals (Herman et al., 2024). A statement, typically realized through a declarative mood, is used to give information; a question, often realized through an interrogative mood, seeks information; a command aims to get the addressee to do something; and an offer provides goods or services (Eggins, 2004). These functions form the basis of what SFL terms speech roles, namely giving vs. demanding and goods-and-services vs. information. By examining how these functions are distributed and negotiated in the interview scene, we can uncover how interpersonal relationships are constructed through language (Lesiana et al., 2023; Jaya et al., 2025; Kartika et al., 2024).

This paper investigates how speech functions are deployed in the interview interaction between Chris Gardner and the panel of interviewers. Specifically, it examines how Gardner's responses despite his disadvantaged appearance attempt to maintain dignity, express confidence, and demonstrate suitability for the role, while the interviewers' language positions them as both evaluators and gatekeepers. The study focuses on the clause-level realizations of speech functions, including mood types and speech role alignments, to analyze how interpersonal meaning unfolds moment-by-moment in the dialogue.

The analysis draws on SFL's theoretical principles, particularly Halliday's notion of meaning as choice within a system. Each clause is treated as a move in an ongoing negotiation of social roles and alignment. Using a detailed speech function analysis, the paper seeks to identify how power, politeness, and alignment are linguistically constructed in the interaction. As Eggins (2004) notes, the way interlocutors choose to initiate or respond to speech functions whether by aligning or disaligning with expectations can reveal underlying social dynamics.

The choice of *The Pursuit of Happyness* is motivated by the emotional intensity and social relevance of its narrative. The film portrays not just an individual's struggle for employment, but also broader issues of class, race, and opportunity. The interview scene crystallizes these tensions in a single moment of linguistic exchange, making it an ideal site for analysis from an SFL perspective. While many studies have analyzed interpersonal meaning in political or academic discourse, fewer have focused on cinematic dialogue as a semi-scripted form that still seeks to simulate authentic interaction (Adele & Wulandari, 2024; Er et al., 2021). This paper thus contributes to both linguistic

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and media discourse analysis by bridging film studies with SFL.

In summary, this study explores the interpersonal function of language in the job interview scene from *The Pursuit of Happyness* through the lens of speech functions as conceptualized in systemic functional linguistics. It argues that Gardner and the interviewers use a range of speech functions to negotiate social roles, align or challenge expectations, and manage face in a highly asymmetrical interaction. By doing so, the paper aims to shed light on the subtle linguistic strategies involved in high-stakes institutional discourse and to demonstrate the applicability of SFL to multimodal and cinematic texts.

**2. LITERATURE REVIEW****2.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics: An Overview**

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language centered on the idea that language is a resource for making meaning, rather than a set of rules for correct usage. It emphasizes the relationship between language and its social context. Originally developed by Michael Halliday, SFL sees language as serving three broad metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Thompson, 2022). The systemic aspect refers to the idea that language offers choices within a system; the functional aspect indicates that these choices are shaped by what language users want to do in a particular context (Nagao, 2023).

SFL has been widely used in linguistic research to analyze how language constructs meaning in real-world situations, including education, media, and institutional discourse. According to Khadafi (2021), the strength of SFL lies in its ability to provide a model of language

that links form and function in context (Rahmawati et al., 2025). This approach is particularly suitable for analyzing spoken discourse where choices about tone, clause structure, and sequence affect the interaction between participants.

**2.2 The Interpersonal Metafunction and Speech Functions**

The interpersonal metafunction concerns how language is used to enact social interactions. It is realized through mood, modality, and speech functions that reflect the speaker's role, attitude, and relationship with the listener (Malini et al., 2022; Ria & Setiawan, 2023). Speech functions are typically classified into four primary types: statements, questions, offers, and commands, which correspond to different mood types such as declarative, interrogative, and imperative clauses (Herman et al., 2023; Silalahi et al., 2024).

These speech functions are not only grammatical categories but also carry interpersonal meanings that reflect power, politeness, negotiation, and alignment. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2019) argue, the choice and sequencing of speech functions allow speakers to build and manage relationships. Furthermore, meanings may shift subtly depending on whether the speaker aligns or misaligns with expected speech roles, making this aspect of analysis particularly useful in asymmetrical conversations like interviews (Namaziandost et al., 2019; Chan & Fugard, 2018).

**2.3 SFL and Spoken Interaction**

SFL has been applied extensively to spoken discourse, especially where interpersonal negotiation is key. Studies on classroom discourse (Zou et al., 2023),

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doctor-patient interactions (Belasen & Belasen, 2018), and television interviews Gill and Baillie (2018) all highlight how speech functions reveal underlying social structures and relationships. In spoken exchanges, participants must constantly negotiate moves initiating, responding, agreeing, or challenging which can be systematically categorized using SFL tools.

Wicaksono and Tristiana (2025) emphasizes that clause-level realizations of speech functions offer insight into speaker positioning and interactional control (Shaumiwaty et al., 2024). In institutional contexts, the use of speech functions is often asymmetrical, reflecting power hierarchies. Job interviews are a particularly rich context for such analysis, yet this genre has received relatively little attention in SFL literature, especially in cinematic or dramatized representations.

#### **2.4 Cinematic Dialogue as Data: A Functional Linguistic Perspective**

While cinematic dialogue is scripted, it often aims to simulate naturalistic interaction and is thus a valuable site for interpersonal analysis. Arhire (2023) argues that fictional dialogue offers insight into how writers construct interpersonal meaning, often reflecting cultural norms and values. Moreover, film dialogue tends to exaggerate or foreground certain interpersonal strategies, making patterns of speech functions more visible.

Anttila et al. (2019) notes that the dialogic exchanges in film are shaped by both narrative goals and interpersonal positioning, which means they can be analyzed both structurally and functionally. Although many linguistic studies focus on natural speech, there is

growing interest in using film data to explore speech functions, especially when examining social roles, power relations, and emotional intensity (Nayeem et al., 2025). Despite this, few studies have specifically applied SFL to job interview scenes in film, which this paper seeks to address.

#### **2.5 Gaps in the Literature**

Existing research has explored SFL in educational, medical, and media discourse, as well as its application to fictional texts. However, there remains a gap in interpersonal function analysis of cinematic job interview scenes a communicative event ripe with power negotiation and personal stakes. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2019) suggest, applying functional grammar to media texts can uncover ideologies and subtle social meanings embedded in discourse. By focusing on speech functions in a job interview scene, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how interpersonal meaning is constructed in fictional yet socially resonant contexts.

### **3. METHODS**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The design of this study is grounded in qualitative-descriptive methodology, which allows for a close reading and interpretation of language features in authentic discourse situations. This design is appropriate for investigating how specific linguistic choices particularly mood types and speech functions reflect interpersonal relationships and social positioning in spoken interactions. The descriptive nature of the study ensures that language is analyzed within its context, capturing

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how meaning unfolds in real time within the movie scene (Tisdell et al., 2025).

**3.2 Data Source**

The primary data used in this research is derived from a particular scene in the film *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Muludi & Adi, 2024). Specifically, the scene selected is the job interview sequence, which occurs approximately between 42:50 and 46:55 of the full-length movie. This segment was accessed via the YouTube clip titled “*The Pursuit Of Happiness - Job interview - Inspirational Movie Scenes Ep. 6.*” The chosen scene offers a compelling example of interpersonal communication under pressure, providing a rich context for analyzing how language reflects and constructs social roles and intentions.

**3.3 Instruments of Data Collection**

To facilitate the analysis, a combination of tools and resources were employed:

- a. Video Playback: The interview scene was repeatedly viewed to ensure comprehensive understanding of both verbal and nonverbal cues.
- b. Transcript Development: A detailed transcript of the dialogue was manually produced, including paralinguistic features where relevant (e.g., pauses, laughter, intonation).
- c. Analytical Model: Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics, especially the interpersonal metafunction, served as the main analytical framework for categorizing speech functions and mood types.

These instruments allowed for systematic observation, transcription, and categorization of language use in the scene.

**3.4 Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection followed a step-by-step process designed to ensure accuracy and depth. First, the relevant movie scene was viewed multiple times to capture the full linguistic and contextual nuance. Following this, a transcript of the interaction was created, incorporating all spoken lines and significant nonverbal elements (e.g., hesitations, emphasis, facial expressions) that contribute to the interpersonal dynamic. Next, the dialogue was segmented at the clause level and analyzed using Halliday’s framework to identify speech functions such as statements, questions, commands, and offers and mood types (declarative, interrogative, imperative). In addition, modal expressions were noted and interpreted to determine levels of certainty, obligation, or willingness conveyed by the speakers. Supplementary literature and linguistic theory were consulted throughout the process to contextualize and validate the analysis.

**3.5 Data Analysis Techniques**

The analytical process employed a hybrid of speech act theory and discourse analysis to explore the functional roles of utterances in the scene. Searle (2019) framework was used to classify speech acts such as assertives, directives, and expressives providing insight into the communicative intent behind each move. Concurrently, the principles of discourse analysis outlined by Gee and Gee (2020) guided the examination of how sequences of utterances shaped meaning, identities, and relationships. By combining these approaches with the SFL model, the study was able to offer a layered interpretation of how interpersonal meaning was enacted in the interaction between the interviewee and interviewers.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### 4.1 Mood Structure Analysis

The following table shows the breakdown of mood elements such as

Subject, Finite, Predicator, Complement, and Mood Adjunct as found in selected clauses from the interview scene.

**Table 1. Mood Structure Analysis of Selected Clauses**

Clause No.	Clause (Excerpt)	Subject	Finite	Predicator	Complement	Mood Adjunct
1	I just got out of a meeting.	I	got	out	of a meeting	just
2	Did you dress up for the interview?	you	did	dress up	for the interview	—
3	I'm the type of person that...	I	am	—	the type of person...	—
4	Let me ask you a question.	me (implicit)	let	ask	you a question	—
5	Can you tell me what you do here?	you	can	tell	me what you do here	—
6	We appreciate your time.	we	appreciate	—	your time	—

##### 4.2 Speech Function and Mood Type Analysis

Each clause was categorized by speech function (statement, question, command, offer) and its corresponding mood type (declarative, interrogative, imperative, or modulated declarative).

**Table 2. Speech Function with Mood Type**

Clause No.	Clause (Excerpt)	Speech Function	Mood Type	Speaker
1	I just got out of a meeting.	Statement	Declarative	Chris Gardner
2	Did you dress up for the interview?	Question	Interrogative	Interviewer
3	I'm the type of person that...	Statement	Declarative	Chris Gardner
4	Let me ask you a question.	Offer (Indirect)	Imperative	Interviewer
5	Can you tell me what you do here?	Question	Interrogative	Chris Gardner
6	We appreciate your time.	Statement	Declarative	Interviewer

The examination of mood structures and speech functions in the job interview scene from *The Pursuit of Happiness* uncovers distinct linguistic patterns that construct interpersonal meaning. Predominantly, statements emerged as the most frequent speech function. Realized mainly through declarative clauses, they served to assert information, shape identity, and highlight qualifications.

Chris Gardner, the interviewee, strategically employed such statements to manage impressions, justify his situation, and project competence demonstrating his deliberate use of language to establish credibility and maintain composure amid pressure.

In contrast, the interviewers made extensive use of questions, typically expressed through interrogative moods.

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These interrogatives controlled the conversational flow and evaluated Gardner's responses, reinforcing institutional authority and the asymmetrical power relations intrinsic to job interviews. Some questions were tactfully softened to convey politeness, reflecting professional norms and mitigating potential confrontation.

Though less frequent, commands and offers played significant interpersonal roles. Commands whether direct imperatives or indirect formulations such as "*Let me ask you*" were used to guide the interaction or elicit information. Offers, albeit rare, carried interpersonal weight when inviting the interviewee to elaborate or share personal insights. These functions subtly negotiated authority and rapport between speakers.

The analysis also revealed a general correspondence between mood types and their associated speech functions: declaratives aligned with statements, interrogatives with questions, and imperatives with commands. However, instances of mood modulation blurred these boundaries, exemplifying the dynamic flexibility of interpersonal meaning-making in authentic discourse. Furthermore, the selective use of modality and mood adjuncts, such as "*can*" or "*might*," expressed varying degrees of obligation, willingness, or uncertainty, often mitigating directive force or hedging assertions. Chris's modal usage conveyed humility and deference while sustaining confidence and engagement.

In sum, the study illustrates how linguistic choices encode social hierarchy and relational stance. Gardner's language balanced respect with self-assurance, whereas the interviewers maintained dominance through questioning and evaluative control. These findings affirm the analytical power of Systemic Functional Linguistics in revealing nuanced interpersonal meanings

embedded in spoken interaction even within dramatized, scripted dialogue.

### Discussion

This section interprets the findings through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), with particular attention to the interpersonal metafunction. Building on Halliday's theoretical foundation and later developments in SFL scholarship, the discussion elucidates how the interactional choices of mood and speech functions in the analyzed scene construct interpersonal positioning, encode asymmetrical power relations, and facilitate role negotiation between participants. The job interview setting an inherently hierarchical and evaluative context intensifies the interpersonal implications of these linguistic choices.

The predominance of declarative statements reveals a shared discourse strategy among the participants, typical of formal exchanges aimed at maintaining decorum and managing face. For Chris Gardner, declaratives operate as a tool for self-representation enabling him to assert competence, rationality, and credibility despite his disadvantaged appearance. This finding aligns with Eggins (2004), who emphasizes the role of declaratives in identity construction and self-assertion within institutional discourse. Through repeated declarative use, Chris symbolically reclaims authority, leveraging language as a form of social capital.

In contrast, the interviewers' reliance on interrogatives underscores their discursive control and institutional dominance. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2019) note, questions inherently assign information-giving roles and thus index power asymmetry in interaction. The interviewers' consistent use of interrogative moods confines Chris to a responsive position, reinforcing hierarchical dynamics where control over topic and turn-taking is unequally

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distributed. The negotiation of initiator and responder roles thus becomes a linguistic manifestation of institutional power.

Instances of commands and offers, though infrequent, further illustrate the subtleties of authority in professional discourse. Indirect realizations such as "Let me ask you a question" blend the force of command with the politeness of an offer an example of what Malini et al. (2022) describes as mitigated speech functions that conform to norms of formality and tact. Direct imperatives are notably absent, replaced by soft power strategies that preserve professionalism while maintaining control.

Modality and mood adjuncts also contribute to the negotiation of interpersonal stance. Modal verbs such as can, might, and would function to soften assertions or requests, introducing shades of tentativeness and collaboration. In SFL terms, these modal resources participate in what Ijam and Al-Ameedi (2024) identify as the appraisal system, managing affect and alignment within interaction. Chris's use of modals (e.g., "I think I can do this") conveys both capability and humility, balancing assertiveness with deference appropriate to the power differential.

While the alignment between mood type and speech function generally holds declaratives for statements, interrogatives for questions, imperatives for commands the analysis also uncovers functional fluidity. Following Halliday (2019), the study affirms that a clause's interpersonal meaning depends not solely on its grammatical form but also on contextual and prosodic realization. Some declaratives in the interviewers' speech, for instance, operate pragmatically as challenges or evaluative prompts rather than neutral statements.

The institutional frame of the encounter shapes these linguistic tendencies. As Umiyati (2020) observe, institutional discourse privileges interactional patterns of regulation and

assessment. The interview scene exemplifies this, as the interviewers' questioning enacts gatekeeping functions while the interviewee's constrained responses reflect compliance within a power-laden exchange.

Finally, although the data derive from cinematic dialogue, its construction deliberately mirrors authentic professional interaction. As Er et al. (2021) notes, scripted dialogue often emulates real-life discourse to achieve verisimilitude, thereby offering a legitimate site for linguistic inquiry. The scene, while fictional, encapsulates the socio-discursive norms governing institutional communication.

In conclusion, the interplay of speech functions and mood structures in the interview scene extends beyond information exchange to embody negotiations of power, identity, and social alignment. The analysis reaffirms the explanatory scope of SFL in uncovering how interpersonal meanings are grammatically and contextually instantiated, even within the crafted realism of cinematic discourse.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the interpersonal metafunction of language focusing on speech functions and mood structures in the job interview scene of *The Pursuit of Happyness*, through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, it explored how linguistic choices extend beyond information exchange to perform crucial interpersonal roles such as negotiating authority, constructing identity, and managing relational dynamics within an institutional and high-stakes communicative setting.

The analysis demonstrated that statements, typically realized through declarative moods, were the most prevalent speech function. These were

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strategically utilized by Chris Gardner to project competence, credibility, and self-assurance despite his socio-economic disadvantage. Conversely, questions, most often realized through interrogative forms, dominated the interviewers' discourse, signaling institutional dominance and control over conversational flow. Although less frequent, commands and offers played a subtle yet significant role, often mitigated by modality and indirect expressions to align with norms of professionalism and politeness in formal contexts.

The findings reaffirm the explanatory power of SFL in elucidating how grammar and discourse structure collaboratively shape interpersonal meaning. Even within scripted dialogue, the linguistic patterns authentically reflect real-world communicative behavior, revealing cultural expectations surrounding hierarchy, deference, and decorum.

Future research could expand on these findings by comparing interpersonal language use across different institutional settings such as classrooms, business negotiations, or political interviews or by examining multimodal aspects like intonation, gesture, and visual framing that co-construct meaning alongside spoken discourse. Additionally, cross-cultural analyses of cinematic and authentic data could further illuminate how interpersonal strategies vary across sociolinguistic contexts.

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