

INTERPERSONAL METAFUNCTION IN BIRTHDAY AND CONDOLENCE MESSAGES: A COMPARATIVE REGISTER ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This study applies Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to compare interpersonal meanings in birthday and condolence messages. The study focuses on mood, modality, and pronoun use to examine how language constructs and sustains social relationships in celebratory versus grief contexts. A descriptive qualitative research design was employed to collect and analyze the data, which consisted of 250 birthday messages and 250 condolence messages obtained from online message sources. Data were annotated with the *UAM Corpus Tool, 6.2*, to identify the interpersonal features of the texts. Results indicate that both registers are dominated by a declarative mood, but they differ in orientation. Birthday messages emphasised positive affect through certainty, possibility, and intention, while condolence messages use greater syntactic complexity, deontic modality, and third-person pronouns to acknowledge loss and express sympathy. The study advances an SFL-based register of short-form digital discourse and reveals how linguistic choices encode empathy, solidarity, and emotional alignments in contextually contrasting, yet relationally intimate genres. This study contributes to register analysis in digital discourse by highlighting interpersonal metafunctions in contrasting genres.

Keywords: *birthday messages; condolence messages; interpersonal metafunction; modality; mood; pronouns; Systemic Functional Linguistics.*

1. Introduction

Language functions as a social tool that enables individuals to fulfil various communicative purposes depending on the context in which interaction occurs (Thi Ngu 2023). Since language use is shaped by social settings and communicative intentions, registers, defined as the conventional language used in specific contexts (Bentum et al. 2022), have become imperative to the understanding of how people engage with language. Egbert and Gracheva (2022) argue that registers are shaped and maintained by the speech communities, adding that the study of register involves examining distinct corpora with close attention to the situational context, linguistic features, and their functional relationships. This view aligns with Halliday's (1985) foundational framework of Systemic Functional

Linguistics (SFL), which posits that language serves three broad metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

According to Halliday (1985), the ideational metafunction allows individuals to represent their experiences and ideas. The textual metafunction, he maintains, organises these experiences into a coherent discourse. Most relevant to this study is the interpersonal metafunction, which enables speakers to enact social roles and express attitudes with others (Halliday 1985). According to Sánchez (2021), the metafunctions operate simultaneously in all communication to shape the form and function of discourse. Language cannot be separated from its context (Bowcher 2021). According to Bowcher, the functions language serves are inherently tied to the situations in which it is used. SFL, therefore, views language as a resource for meaning-making that operates between text and context (Halliday & Hasan 1989). This relationship is essential to the production of meaningful communication and to its interpretation. Halliday and Hasan (1989) further argue that linguistic meaning cannot be fully realised without considering the context in which an utterance occurs. This position is further supported by Chen and Brown (2024), who argue that context is central to how meaning is constructed and understood.

Bowcher (2021) argues that without proper consideration of context, a text risks becoming semantically ambiguous or devoid of meaning. This symbiotic relationship, as observed by Allan (2020) and Amphaeris et al. (2023), is necessary to the integration of contextual analysis into linguistic studies. In essence, the relationship between text and context is not merely a theoretical construct but a fundamental principle that governs the dynamics of communication across diverse contexts and species (Allan 2020; Amphaeris et al. 2023).

Ateca-Amestoy and Prieto-Rodriguez (2023) argue that in any given cultural framework, individuals routinely engage in a variety of social activities, such as casual conversations, debates, wedding ceremonies, service encounters, and storytelling. These activities are characterised by distinct structural and linguistic patterns that serve as markers of their identity and purpose. Yuryeva (2019) observes that conventionalised forms of communication in these social activities often emerge within cultures over time. According to him, this communicative process enables the effective realisation of these activities, which SFL models as genres. As defined by Martin and Rose (2008: 6), genre is “the recurrent configurations of meanings that enact the social practices of a culture. By identifying and describing genres linguistically and mapping their interrelations, SFL models the context of culture as a network of interconnected meanings that provides an empirical and methodical framework for analysing the relationship between culture and text. In the current study, the researchers seek to comparatively analyse 250 birthday and 250 condolence messages. Specifically, the analysis aims to explore how language used for birthdays and condolences as sub-registers reflects interpersonal metafunction. Additionally, it will demonstrate how interpersonal metafunction is employed to forge social bonds with participants and how linguistic expressions are used to exercise similarities and differences between birthday and condolence messages. The following questions serve to guide the study.

1. How are mood, modality, and personal pronouns realised in birthday and condolence messages?
2. What interpersonal meanings distinguish these two registers?
3. How do linguistic choices reflect socio-emotional alignment in celebratory versus grief contexts?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Text Messaging as a Communicative Practice

Text messaging has become an important tool for communication all over the world (Suleman et al. 2021; Nouri & Hussein 2023; Dobson et al. 2024). It is increasing at a noticeable rate, with an estimated eight trillion text messages to be sent each year (Olia 2024). Text messaging is beneficial when most users apply it for coordinating activities, maintaining social relationships, and providing information for each other (Bhattacharjee et al. 2023). To some extent, a number of studies have been conducted to look into the linguistic conventions in text messages. These include a study conducted by Soria, Gutiérrez-Colón, and Frumuselu (2020), who argued that the application of text messaging harms formal writing skills, particularly in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. Liimatta (2023) posits that texters can show their function in constructing social relations and maintain the relationship with recipients by the use of lexico-grammatical structures in text messaging. Additionally, Coplan et al. (2022) believe that text messaging increases confidence and interaction among shy and lonely people. The authors posit that people interact with each other and share all kinds of information, such as expressing their status, social, and individual attitudes, by sending text messages.

Specifically on birthday and condolence messages, Lin and Walden (2023) assert that birthday messages are ceremonial tokens that may purposely or unintentionally transmit stereotyping messages about the ageing process whereas Ajayi and Akinrinlola (2024) identified condolence messages as those that are offered by friends, neighbours or acquaintances who try to sympathise with us when we are hit by an unpleasant situation or phenomena such as death of a beloved one. Despite these studies, little has been done to comparatively analyse the interpersonal metafunctions used in birthday and condolence messages. Chandra (2019) analysed the structure and function of birthday greetings within social interactions, particularly how these greetings are expressed and perceived in different contexts. His research, however, concentrated on the role of birthday messages in promoting solidarity and reflecting social relationships among community members. Additionally, Okafor (2022) investigated the address terms used by WhatsApp group members when expressing birthday wishes among their members. The studies examined the variety of address terms employed, such as first names, last names, titles, special nicknames, pet names, and instances of no address term, as well as the social factors that influence the choice of these address terms in the context of expressing birthday, leaving the metafunctions of these messages unexplored.

Even though these studies have examined text messaging in terms of linguistic conventions (Soria, Gutiérrez-Colón, and Frumuselu, 2020), social bonding (Liimatta, 2023), address terms (Okafor, 2022), and ceremonial functions (Chandra, 2019; Coplan et al., 2022; Ajayi and Akinrinlola, 2024), they have not systematically analysed how interpersonal meaning is realised through the interpersonal metafunction. Specifically, these studies have not explored how mood types, modality, and appraisal resources are deployed to enact social roles and negotiate relationships in birthday and condolence messages. They have also not comparatively examined these two genres. The current study, therefore, bridges this gap by applying the SFL framework to comparatively analyse how interpersonal meanings are constructed and differentiated in celebratory versus grief-oriented text messages.

2.2 Interpersonal Metafunctions in SFL

In Halliday's (1985) definition of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the linguistic and extra-linguistic properties of meaning-making are believed to be achieved through systems of choice rather than fixed syntactic rules. These choices are also influenced by the social contexts since meaning is hard to understand without knowing the background or context. SFL, therefore, conceptualises language as both "systemic" because it presents speakers with a network of interrelated options for meaning, and "functional," since its primary concern is with the purposes language serves in social interaction (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004). Unlike traditional grammar models, SFL prioritises how linguistic elements realise meaning in context, making the text, rather than the sentence, the central unit of analysis.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) proposed four ways of understanding meaning (metafunctions of language), of which three are realised within the structure of the clause. The fourth metafunction, however, manifests within the clause complex, that is, sequences of clauses interconnected through logico-semantic relations (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 61). These four metafunctions are as follows:

Table 1

Metafunctions and their reflexes in the grammar

Metafunction	Definition (kind of meaning)	Corresponding status in the clause	Type of structure
Experiential	Construing a model of experience	Clauses as representation	Segmental (based on constituency)
Interpersonal	Enacting social relationships	Clauses as exchange	Prosodic
Textual	Creating relevance to context	Clause as a message	Culminative
Logical	Construing logical relations	–	Iterative

Source: Halliday and Matthiessen (2004: 61)

Chueasuai (2017) explains that the interpersonal metafunction of language looks at how language is used to establish and maintain relationships with people. This is done by, among other things, controlling their behaviour and giving them information. In analysing the interpersonal metafunctions that people assume when interacting with others, Herman et al. (2022) opine that there are speech functions or roles (i.e., giving a command, making an offer, asking a question, or making a statement) that communicators assume whenever texts are exchanged.

These speech functions fall under the domain of Mood, Modality, and the use of Personal Pronouns. The Mood is made up of the Subject and the Finite. The Subject supplies the rest of what it takes to form a proposition (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:76). The finite, on the other hand, refers to the first functional element of the verbal group (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Interpersonal metafunctions are also realised in terms of Modality (Ijam & Al-Ameedi, 2024). Briones (2016) contends that modality is identified in terms of determining the degree by which a language user demonstrates the certainty or lack thereof of what they are communicating, which is known as Modalisation, and the degree of imposition that they are putting across when asking someone to do something or exchange

goods and services, known as Modulation (Briones 2016: 111). Ijam and Al-Ameedi (2024) opine that the uses of lexico-grammatical resources such as modal verbs (can/could, may/might, shall/should, must, etc.), adjectives (possible, certain, probable, inevitable, etc.), adverbs (probably, likely, perhaps, rarely, etc.), nouns (likelihood, possibility, probability, etc.), and other devices serve as triggers of Modalisation. On the other hand, Modulation shows the speaker's sense of obligation: allowed, supposed, and required, as well as inclination: willing, keen, and determined. It thus exposes the speaker's level of confidence while exchanging information through a wide range of linguistic resources, including modal verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and other forms such as "required to" and "inclined to."

In addition to mood and modality, Liping (2017) argues that interpersonal metafunction can also be analysed in terms of the choice of personal pronouns. For instance, the use of *I-You* establishes a direct relationship between the speaker and the addressee, which creates a dyadic interaction between the interlocutors (Ofosu, et al., 2023). Liping (2017) posits that this positioning allows speakers to assert their perspectives (*I*) while simultaneously acknowledging the presence and role of the listener (*you*). Similarly, the pronoun *we* can be used to create inclusivity, signalling solidarity or shared identity between the speaker and the audience (Ofosu et al., 2023), which can strengthen social bonds and collective alignment. This theory holds significance in the current study as it reveals how language is used to establish, maintain, or manage social relationships through mood, modality, and pronoun choices.

3. Research Method

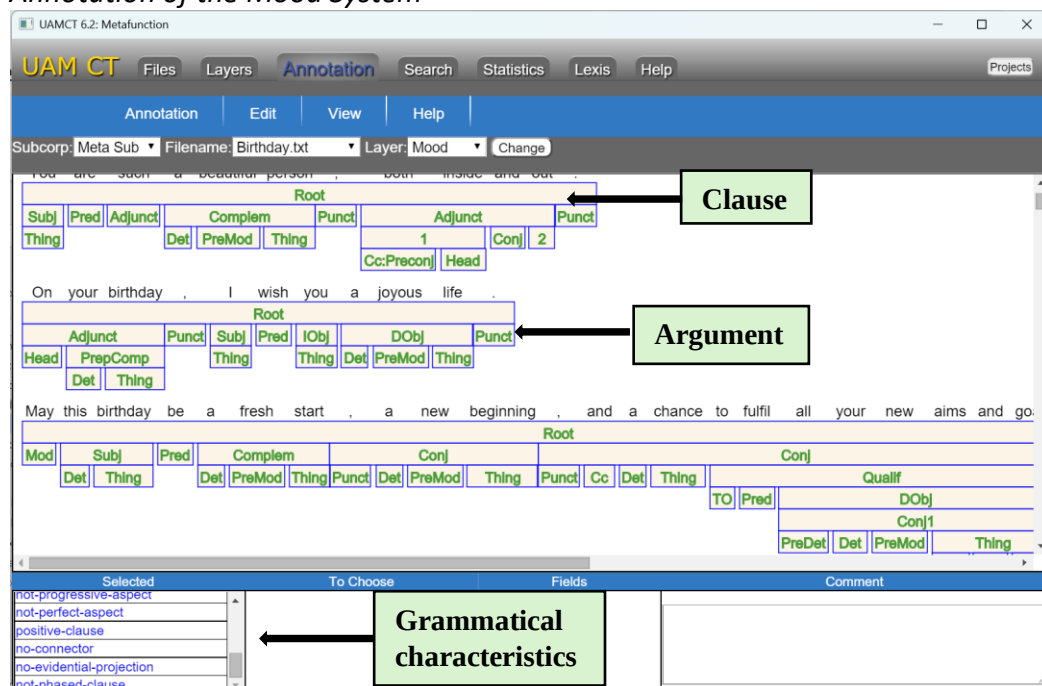
3.1 Research Design

The researchers used a descriptive qualitative research design for the collection and analysis of the data. This approach is suited for the exploration of language used to enact social relationships and to indicate the roles of participants in communication. The researchers used the simple random sampling technique to collect the data since all the text messages share the same characteristics and stand the chance of being selected at random. The data consists of 250 birthday messages and 250 condolence messages, sourced from the internet. The selected messages were those that were given by the close relatives (i.e., mothers, fathers, spouses, children, or siblings) as the inclusion criterion. Afreh and Ofosu (2024) argue, for instance, that the death of an individual has a heavy toll on the close relations because of the social and emotional proximity between them. This assertion is backed by Bottomley et al. (2017), who claim that interpersonal closeness with the deceased prior to death is a significant predictor of grief reactions following loss. The researchers contend that the severity of grief reactions often reflects the closeness of the relationship (Bottomley et al. 2017: 2), which, most often, is realised by the immediate family members. Thus, this data can serve as an appropriate corpus for analysis.

3.2 Data Handling and Mode of Analysis

The data were processed through a computer-mediated annotation software, *UAM Corpus Tool 6.2*, for interpersonal metafunction (O'Donnell 2008). The researchers used the in-built layers of SFL Mood, Modality, and Personal Pronoun analysis of UAM CT. Figure 1 below illustrates how the corpus tool has annotated clauses based on the Mood-system layer. The tool was also used to generate the statistical properties of the corpus and provided insights into patterns and characteristics of language use.

Figure 1
Annotation of the Mood System



Note:

The clause to be annotated appears in the body of the software, one at a time, and beneath the utterance are boxes for the accompanying argument that determines the function of the Mood (declarative, imperative, or interrogative). Beneath the interface are all the grammatical characteristics that input the Mood of the clause when the clause follows the structure of such a system.

To ensure systematic analysis and easy referencing, the data were coded according to the message type and reference numbers. Thus, messages were labelled with the code (BM for Birthday Message) and (CM for Condolence Message) together with a numerical identifier to specify individual messages within the corpus. This coding system allows for precise identification and discussion of specific texts during the analysis. Reliability was ensured through systematic coding and cross-checking.

3.3 Ethical Consideration

Since the data for the study were obtained from publicly accessible platforms, no formal ethical approval or permission was required. The materials did not involve direct interaction with human participants; however, the researchers observed strict ethical standards throughout the research process. Particularly, attention was given to maintaining the textual integrity of the data, ensuring that the content was neither altered nor misrepresented during collection, analysis, and reporting. In addition, the researchers carefully screened the data to ensure that it did not contain any information that could identify an individual or a specific group of people. Any personal identifiers, including names, usernames, images, or contextual clues, were cleaned. Consequently, the data was fully anonymised, and the study posed no risk of harm, private violation, or misrepresentation to individuals or communities.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The section presents the results of the analysis of the data as annotated by UAM CT. In the first section of the analysis, the lexical characteristics of the clauses are calculated and presented. This is followed by the mood systems analysis. The modality and the use of personal pronouns are also presented. In the discussion section, the researchers give a detailed qualitative interpretation of the interpersonal metafunction of the realisation of the mood, modality, and the use of personal pronouns in the data.

4.1.1 Lexical Patterns of the Data

The lexical patterns of the clauses in the data are presented in Table 2 below. These patterns include the number of clauses and tokens in each clause. The clause types (group or complex) are also presented.

Table 2

Lexical patterns of the data

GRAMMATICAL-RANK	Birthday		Condolences		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Token	7282	48.1	7852	51.9	15134
Clause	870	40.8	1261	59.2	2131
Group	2464	49.4	2522	50.6	4986
Complex	187	38.4	300	61.6	487

Source: Statistical analysis with UAM Corpus Tool

The analysis of the data indicates similarity in the length and linguistic density of text message types. In Table 2, a marginal variation is observed in tokens, clauses, groups, and complex clauses. For instance, the birthday messages accounted for 7,282 (48.1%) tokens distributed across 870 clauses. In contrast, condolence messages comprised 7,852 (51.9%), along with 1261 clauses. These findings suggest that while both genres exhibit comparable textual volume, condolence messages tend to be structurally more elaborated.

4.1.2 Mood System

In this section, we examine the finiteness of the clauses, the polarity of finite clauses, and the types of finite clauses that signal the interpersonal metafunction in the text messages. Table 3 presents the distribution of finite and non-finite clauses.

Table 3

Finites in the clause

FINITENESS	Birthday		Condolences		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
finite-clause	676	39.0	1059	61	1735
non-finite-clause	194	49.0	202	51.0	396
TOTAL:	870	40.8	1261	59.2	2131

Source: Statistical analysis with UAM Corpus Tool

The analysis reveals that the data contained 2131 clauses, of which 1735 are finite clauses, and 396 are non-finite clauses. Finite clauses occurred 676 times in birthday

messages (39%) and 1059 times in condolence messages (61%). These are the clauses from which the interpersonal metafunctions are inferred. Among these finite clauses, there are positive and negative finites; thus, some of the verb arguments express positive sensitivity while others express the negative. Table 4 presents the positive and negative realisations of the finite clauses in the data.

Table 4

Polarity of the finite clauses

POLARITY	Birthday		Condolences		TOTAL
	N	%	N	%	N
positive clause	651	39.2	1011	60.8	1662
negative clause	25	34.3	48	65.7	73
TOTAL:	676	39.0	1059	61.0	1735

Source: Statistical analysis with UAM Corpus Tool

Of the 1735 finite clauses, positive clauses constitute 651 clauses, representing 39.2% in birthday messages, while 1011 positive clauses, representing 60.8%, were realised in condolence messages. Similarly, negative clauses were realised more in condolence messages than birthday messages, with 65.7% in condolence and 34.3% in birthday messages. In Table 5, the statistical representation of the types of mood: declarative, interrogative, and imperative, is illustrated.

Table 5

Types of mood (Finite clauses)

FINITE-CLAUSE-TYPE3	Birthday		Condolences		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Declarative clause	599	38.4	961	61.6	1560
Interrogative clause	3	100	0	0	3
Imperative clause	74	43	98	57	172
TOTAL:	676	39	1059	61	1735

Source: Statistical analysis with UAM Corpus Tool

Visualisation from the table indicates that declarative clauses constitute the majority of the clauses in the data, with a total of 1560, representing 90% of the entire finite clauses. With a total of 1735 finite clauses, declarative clauses in birthday messages consist of 599 clauses representing 38.4%, while condolence messages are made up of 961 declarative clauses representing 61.6%. Following the declarative clauses are imperative clauses with 172 clauses, representing 9.9% of the total finite clauses. In terms of the message types, birthday messages have 74 (43%) imperative clauses, and condolence messages have 98 (57%) imperative clauses. Interrogative clauses were the least common clauses that occurred in the data. In both text message types, three (3) instances of interrogative clauses are used.

4.1.3 Modal Markers

This section presents the use of modality as a linguistic resource to express varying degrees of certainty, possibility, probability, and imposition in the selected messages. The

discussion is structured in two parts: first, the distribution of modality types (verbal and non-verbal) is examined, followed by an analysis of the modal semantic categories.

4.1.4 Modality Types

Table 6 provides an overview of the distribution between verbal and non-verbal modality types across the data. This is further elaborated in Tables 7 and 8, which present a breakdown of the specific verbal modality types (modal auxiliary and semi-modals) and non-verbal modality types (adjectival and adverbial modalities), respectively.

Table 6

Modality type

MODALITY-TYPE	Birthday		Condolences		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
verbal modality	141	31.2	311	68.8	452
nonverbal modality	5	71.4	2	28.6	7
TOTAL:	146	31.8	313	68.2	459

Source: Statistical analysis with UAM Corpus Tool

As presented in Table 6, verbal modality dominated the messages with a total of 454 instances, compared with seven (7) occurrences of non-verbal modality. This contrast highlights the centrality of verbal expressions in the linguistic encoding of certainty and interpersonal negotiation (Hartati 2015) within the communicative acts of the messages. This suggests that Condolence messages exhibited a higher frequency of verbal modality, accounting for 311 occurrences (68.8%), while Birthday messages registered 141 occurrences (31.2%).

Table 7

Verbal modality type

VERBAL-MODALITY-TYPE	Birthday		Condolences		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
modal auxiliary	137	33.5	272	66.5	409
semi modal	4	9.3	39	90.7	43
TOTAL:	141	31.2	311	68.8	452

Source: Statistical analysis with UAM Corpus Tool

The distribution of verbal modalities further highlights the predominant use of modal auxiliaries by the speakers across both message types. Specifically, modal auxiliaries accounted for 137 instances in Birthday messages, representing 33.5% of the total, and 272 cases in Condolence messages, representing 66.5%. Additionally, a distribution of semi-modals was observed, with Condolence messages accounting for 39 cases (90.7%) and Birthday messages with four (4) occurrences (9.3%).

Table 8

Nonverbal modality type

NONVERBAL-MODALITY-TYPE	Birthday		Condolences		
	N	%	N	%	N
adjectival modality	1	33.3	2	66.7	3

adverbial modality	4	100	0	00.0	4
TOTAL:	5	71.4	2	28.6	7

Source: Statistical analysis with UAM Corpus Tool

The analysis also identified adjectival and adverbial modalities as the two types of non-verbal modality present in the data. Although their frequency was relatively low compared to verbal modality, a slight distribution was observed between the message types, with five (5) appearances in birthday messages and two (2) in condolence messages. This indicates a marginal preference for such forms in celebratory contexts. Further disaggregation of the data revealed that adjectival modality accounted for three (3) occurrences, while adverbial modality constituted four (4) instances. Notably, all instances of adverbial modality were found exclusively in Birthday messages. This aligns with Machin and Mayr (2023), who contend that adverbial modalities are often used to convey optimism, possibility, and well-wishing, which is commonly associated with celebratory messages, as illustrated in the examples below.

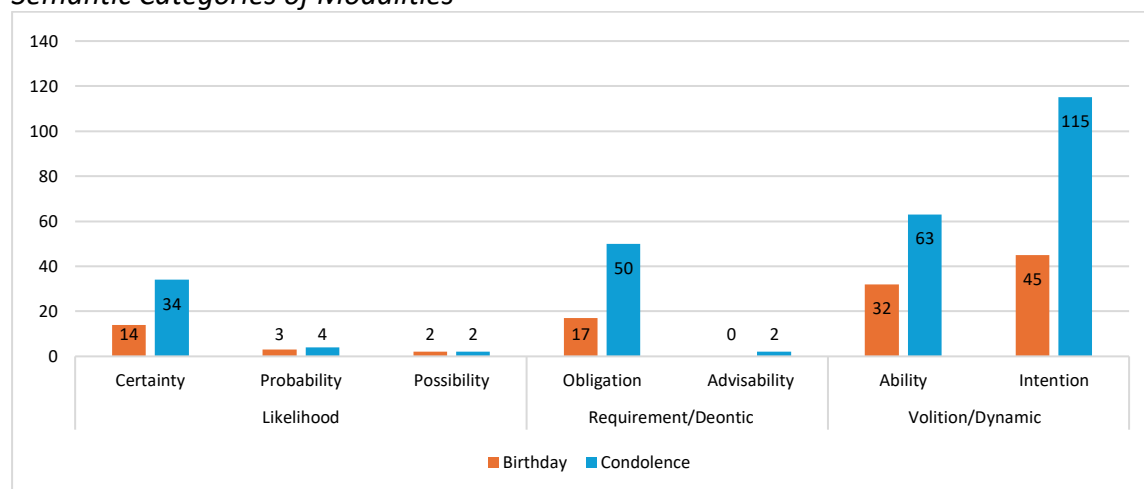
- (1) *Someone as amazing as you is **surely** a gift on earth sent from above (BM 48).*
- (2) *To me, you are like a box of chocolate: sweet and **undeniably** amazing (BM 217).*

4.1.5 Modal Semantics

This section presents the semantic realisation of the identified modality types in the data. It focuses on how speakers express epistemic, deontic, and dynamic meanings through linguistic choices. Figure 2 below illustrates the distribution of semantic categories across the data.

Figure 2

Semantic Categories of Modalities



Source: Statistical analysis with UAM Corpus Tool

The data from the figure above indicate that speakers predominantly employ modality to express intention, ability, obligation, and certainty. For instance, modality expressing intention occurred most frequently with 160 instances, followed by ability (95), obligation (67), and certainty (48). Probability, possibility, and advisability were the least occurring categories.

Certainty

Both BM and CM transmit different levels of assurance using modality expressions based on the evidence. Extracts (3-5), for instance, utilise the words “undeniably,” “clear,” and “sure” to convey a high degree of assurance, which positions the speakers as highly confident about the truth of their statements.

- (3) *To me, you are like a box of chocolate: **undeniably** amazing (BM 217).*
- (4) *It was **clear** to everyone to see how much you loved your father (CM 100)*
- (5) *The loss of a father and grandfather is devastating, but I’m **sure** his memory will always be with you (CM 119).*

In extract (3), the use of “undeniably” leaves no space for alternative interpretations. It operates as a linguistic resource for maximising certainty and persuasive force. Additionally, in extract (4), the speaker constructs a shared epistemological ground to imply that the truth is self-evident and collectively acknowledged. It provides solidarity and mutual agreement between the interlocutors. The addition of signalling certainty (extract 5) also intensifies the evaluative tone of the message. The use of “sure” is not only a factual prediction but an emotionally reinforced assurance that combines epistemic certainty with affective reassurance, particularly significant in the context of empathy.

Probability

In modality, probability expressions represent the likelihood that an event will occur. From the analysis of the data, it was revealed that both BM and CM convey high likelihood via modality expressions based on the facts. Expressions in extract 6 exemplify this probability.

- (6) *Someone as amazing as you is **surely** a gift on earth sent from above (BM 48).*

The use of the adverb “surely” encodes a high probability that highlights the speaker’s strong epistemic commitment that the statement is a possibility and an almost certain truth. The use of this modality positions the speaker as a credible evaluator of the proposition. This aligns with Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2014) interpersonal metafunction that connects the audience to the speaker on an affective level. For instance, in the birthday and celebratory contexts, the messages foster intimacy and positive relational alignment between the interlocutors.

Possibility

In the Hallidayan interpersonal metafunction modules, possibility allows the speaker to keep claims tentative and avoid overstatements (Hadi & Guo 2020). In the extracts below, the statements support the notion that something is feasible but not always true. The use of “maybe,” as exemplified in extracts (7) and (8), indicates the speakers’ capacity to prove something.

- (7) *I know that it only takes a second or **maybe** less than a second to say I love you (BM 94).*
- (8) *Well, **maybe** that’s why mothers are great and next to God (BM 234).*

The use of *maybe* marks a lower degree of commitment. It demonstrates that the propositions are conceivable but not assertive as absolute truth. This creates space for alternative perspectives. The expression of “maybe” as a possibility can also express

politeness in that the speaker avoids imposing their views as a definite claim that protects both their face (avoiding being proven wrong) and the other's face (avoiding direct contradiction).

Obligation

In Halliday and Mathiesen's (2014) SFL framework, obligation falls under the deontic modality. This metafunction encodes the speaker's stance towards the expression of the degree of compulsion, necessity, or permission. Expressions of obligation could be strong, weak, or non-existent. From the analysis, it is realised that both CM and BM use these modal expressions frequently.

(9) *If there's anything you **need to** help get through this awful time, just ask (CM 15).*

(10) *The bond of a brother can't be described; you **have to** have known it (CM 184).*

In example (9), the use of the modal "need to" denotes weak or conditional obligation because it does not impose an action but rather positions the offer of help within the addressee's control. The conditional clause in extract (9) further mitigates imposition and functions as a politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson 1987) by preserving the addressee's negative face (the desire to act without undue constraint). In extract (10), however, the phrase carries a strong obligation to imply that knowing the bond is a prerequisite for full understanding of its meaning.

Advisability

Modal verbs that imply what is desirable or advisable in a certain circumstance, such as "should," "ought to," and "would like to," are frequently used to convey advisability (Zhang 2019). According to Zhang (2019), the context and the particular words used determine how strong the advice is. From the analysis, the use of this type of modality is used to communicate suggestions or recommendations and frequently implies a certain level of obligation or desire, as exemplified in the example in extract (11) below.

(11) *But her memories **should** be treasured, and her life celebrated for the amazing woman she was. (CM 14).*

From the extract, it is realised that the speaker advises the addressee on a socially desirable action that invites alignment with the speaker's values and emotional note.

Ability

Modal verbs play an essential role in expressing a speaker's attitude towards the addressee (Zeng & Wang, 2019). Imre (2017) has observed that "can" is one of the most frequently used modal verbs used convey ability, possibility, and permission. In the data, "can" and its negative form "cannot" are used to express ability. This is exemplified in extracts (12) and (13).

(12) *I **can never** thank God enough for blessing me with you as my father (BM 22).*

(13) *You make me the happiest, and I **cannot** express how much I love you (BM 141).*

It is realised from the data that both condolence and birthday messages employ the modal terms for mental ability. Thus, the expression of ability is not limited to the literal capacity of the verb, but it extends to the metaphorical, social, and emotional domains (see Olson et al., 2006). In extract (12), for instance, the negative modal "can never" demotes a

metaphorical and bounded ability where the speaker acknowledges the impossibility of fully expressing gratitude. This message frames the capacity to thank as inherently insufficient. A similar emotional limitation is conveyed in extract (13), where the speaker's inability to communicate their affection translates it into words.

Intention

Viebahn (2018) espouses that modal expressions of intentionality express a person's plans, intentions, or readiness to carry out a specific action. As seen in examples (14-16), modal verbs such as "will" and "would" are frequently used to convey intentionality.

- (14) *Even if we are near or miles apart, we **will** still be together by heart (BM 133).*
(15) *It doesn't matter how old you become; I **will** never stop loving you (BM 157).*
(16) *Though nothing could ever make up for losing your dear mother, I **will** be praying that you are looked after and helped through the shock of her passing (CM 232).*

From extract (14), for instance, the speaker affirms the endurance of emotional connection despite the physical distance. This helps the speaker to shift togetherness from spatial to emotional closeness. In extract (15), the intention expressed unconditional and timeless affection to highlight commitment and stability. Additionally, the speaker in extract (16), for instance, acknowledged the irreplaceability of the loss to offer emotional support to the addressee.

4.1.6 Personal Pronouns

Liping (2017) has contended that the choice of personal pronouns also triggers the realisation of interpersonal metafunction. The frequency distribution has been presented in the table below.

Table 9

Personal pronoun types

PERSONAL PRONOUN TYPE	Birthday		Condolences		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
1p-pronoun	442	45.5	529	54.5	971
2p-pronoun	536	46.1	627	53.9	1163
3p-pronoun	44	14.3	267	85.8	311
TOTAL:	1022	41.8	1423	58.2	2445

Source: Statistical analysis with UAM Corpus Tool

The analysis of personal pronouns reveals significant patterns in the expression of interpersonal alignment. This indicates that speakers in both message types exhibited marked preferences for second-person pronouns. A total of 1163 instances of second-person pronouns were recorded across the data, followed by 971 instances of first-person pronouns. The third-person pronoun, by contrast, occurred far less frequently, with only 311 instances, indicating that direct engagement between sender and recipient dominated the communicative style.

In terms of message-type distribution, condolence messages contained a higher frequency of personal pronouns than birthday messages. This suggests a greater degree of personalised and relational focus in emotionally sensitive contexts. As presented in the table above, 1423 personal pronouns were identified in condolence messages, compared to 1022

in birthday messages. Concerning first-person pronoun usage, Condolence messages accounted for 529 instances, slightly surpassing the 422 instances recorded in birthday messages. Similarly, second-person pronouns appeared 627 times in condolence messages, as opposed to 536 times in birthday messages. A more pronounced contrast in the use of third-person pronouns, with 267 instances in condolence messages compared to 44 instances in birthday messages, is realised.

These findings may suggest that condolence messages tend to be more interpersonally intensive. The relatively higher use of third-person pronouns in condolences discourse may also reflect references to the deceased or broader family network, thus expanding the interpersonal frame beyond the immediate dyad of speaker-addressee. This finding is consistent with (e.g., Biber et al. 2021; Holmes & Wilson, 2022), which emphasise the role of pronouns in shaping relational dynamics and discourse intimacy across communicative genres.

4.2 Discussion

The comparative analysis of birthday and condolence messages as distinctive communicative registers reveals significant insight into how interpersonal metafunctions are realised through mood, modality, and the use of personal pronouns. From the analysis, it was revealed that condolences messages have a higher frequency of clauses and the increased presence of grouped and complex clause structures. This points to a greater degree of syntactic complexity. This observation aligns with Absattar et al.'s (2022) proposition that language use in emotionally charged contexts, such as expressing sympathy or grief, often necessitates a more elaborate syntactic organisation to convey affective meanings effectively. Similarly, Eggins (2004) and Cheng (2023) note that the deployment of clause complexes can serve interpersonal functions that enable speakers or writers to manage face-threatening acts delicately, as is often required in condolence text messages.

Although both message types function in contexts of interpersonal closeness, they are different in emotional tone, communicative purpose, and linguistic strategies. A key finding is the predominant use of the declarative mood across both registers. Dąbrowska (2019) contends that the use of declarative moods functions as a vehicle for sharing statements, sentiments, and evaluation rather than solicitation of information, something both message types sought to do. Specifically, regarding birthday messages in the current study, it was realised from the analysis that declarative statements tend to be positively valenced. This allows the senders of the message to appreciate, admire, and express joy with the addressee. In condolence messages, on the other hand, declarative statements were used to convey empathetic acknowledgement or negative polarity, which recognises the loss of a loved one and the expression of solidarity with the bereaved.

The prevalence of negative polarity in condolence messages comes as no surprise since Schaefficke et al. (2021) argue that this type of polarity expresses a lack of something or a negative state. For instance, in the extracts below, the senders express their inability to share the same emotions as the bereaved family to heighten the pain the demise of the deceased has caused the family.

(17) *I can't tell you how sorry I was to hear about your sister* (CM 138).

(18) *I can't imagine how hard this is for you* (CM 151)

The analysis also demonstrates disparity between the use of verbal and non-verbal modalities, suggesting that the expression of affect, obligation, or epistemic commitment in

emotionally charged contexts such as condolences necessitates a greater reliance on verbal modal forms (see Duku et al. 2024). This is reinforced by the communicative function of modality as a resource for interpersonal alignment and social politeness (Van Linden 2012; Slipetska et al. 2023).

In terms of verbal modality distribution, the analysis revealed the use of modal auxiliaries across both registers. However, a sharp contrast is realised in terms of semi-modals. The analysis demonstrates that condolences messages are heavily dense with semi-modals such as “have to,” “need to,” “supposed to,” which often express necessity, advisability, or emotional sensitivity (Van Linden 2012; Tseronis & Forceville, 2017). These verbs are more strategically deployed in messages of sympathy where interpersonal alignment and softening of speech acts are linguistically significant. For instance, in examples (19-21), the speakers express a strong sense of necessity and obligation.

(19) *You feel responsible for what happened and **need to** be there to help when he is in trouble* (CM 163).

(20) *The bond of a brother can't be described; you **have to** know it* (CM 184).

(21) *I wish you everything the world **has to** offer* (BM 177).

In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the interpersonal metafunction highlights how modality also plays a part in meaning transmission between speakers and listeners. According to Chandra (2019) and Dąbrowska (2019), positive, joyous, and optimistic attitudes are frequently reflected in birthday messages in particular. In the current study, certainty, possibility, and intention are the categories of modality that indicate a high level of positive expectancy or assurance for the future well-being of birthday celebrants. From the analysis of the data, it was realised that senders of birthday messages projected optimism and affirmed their positive relational bond with the birthday celebrants. In contrast, condolence messages made greater use of obligation, necessity, and epistemic certainty to position the senders as sympathisers who wish to provide support and consolation to the deceased's family. The prevalence of semi-modals in the data, especially in condolence messages, demonstrates the use of deontic modality to convey shared values and emotional commitments (Jarmużek & Klonowski, 2020), often framed in ways that respect the addressee's autonomy. This is in alignment with Brown and Levinson (1987), where speakers seek to mitigate imposition while affirming solidarity. It also noted that birthday messages frequently use modulation to convey wishes, desires, and tactful instructions for the recipient to have fun.

The use of a variety of modality types, including modulation (i.e., obligation and willingness, modality (high probability/certainty), median probability, low probability, and modalisation (probability and usuality), provides tangible support and respect to the grieving process. A closer examination of the message-type distribution reveals that condolence messages consistently exhibited higher frequencies across all the semantic categories compared with birthday messages. This highlights that modalities are relied on to articulate emotional support for others (Tseronis & Forceville, 2017). These patterns also confirm the study by Cheung (2021), that modality, in condolences, for example, serves as a rhetorical and pragmatic resource for managing interpersonal affects, which tends to project supportive commitments and reinforce social expectations.

Additionally, a great level of civility and respect for the bereaved person's emotional state is demonstrated by the circumspect and indirect modal language used in condolence messages. Liping (2017) found that personal pronouns play a significant role in establishing

relationships between speakers and addressees. The study found that speakers preferred second-person pronouns to indicate a direct and rational mode of address. Condolence messages contained a higher frequency of personal pronouns than birthday messages. This suggests a greater degree of personalisation and relational focus in emotionally sensitive contexts. The higher use of third-person pronouns in condolences may also reflect references to the deceased or broader family network, which expands the interpersonal frame beyond the immediate dyad of speaker-addressee. This strategy situates the grief within a broader social circle. Lucidly, condolence messages highlight understanding, support, and a tactful recognition of loss and the mourning process, whereas birthday messages concentrate on optimistic future predictions and joyous wishes. In order to negotiate positions and actualise social interactions between speakers and listeners, modality is essential.

Together, the study shows that mood, modality, and personal pronouns function synergistically as interpersonal resources, with positively valenced declarative moods, modalisation, and second-person pronouns in birthday messages constructing optimism and solidarity. Additionally, increased clause complexity, deontic modality, negative polarity, and expanded pronoun use in condolence messages negotiate empathy, face, and social alignment in contexts of loss.

5. Conclusion

The study aimed to analyse the interpersonal metafunction between birthday and condolence messages as distinct communicative registers. Drawing on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) SFL, the study revealed that mood, modality, and personal pronouns are central to how social relationships are enacted and maintained in each register. From the analysis, it has been established that positive, joyous, and optimistic attitudes are frequently reflected in birthday messages. Certainty, possibility, and intention are the categories of modality that indicate a high level of positive expectancy or assurance for future well-being. Additionally, birthday messages frequently use modulation to convey wishes, desires, and tactful instructions for the recipient to have fun. These features reinforce intimacy and strengthen the bond between the addresser and the addressee. However, sensitive communications meant to acknowledge loss, offer consolation, and show sympathy are used in condolence messages.

The findings affirm that the interpersonal metafunction of the choice of the modal types is reflective of the relationship of the sender and recipient, as well as the socio-emotional context and cultural expectations of the communicative event. Mood, modality, and personal pronouns work systematically to realise register-specific interpersonal meaning and illustrate a linguistic resource to differentiate their social purpose. Thus, this study is underpinned by the idea that language in ceremonial and affective contexts is far from formulaic (s); rather, it is a dynamic resource that speakers use to suit the tenor, emotional demands, and social function of the interactions. The study also informs digital discourse analysis by showing how linguistic choices encode empathy and solidarity.

This study is limited to online messages; therefore, it is recommended that future research should include spoken interactions and compare interpersonal metafunctions across cultures and platforms. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study demonstrates how interpersonal metafunctions shape relational intimacy in contrasting genres of digital discourse.

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