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Fakultas Sastra Universitas Al-Ghifari

Jln. Cisaranten Kulon No.140 Bandung

Telp. 022.7835813

Email: unfarisastra@gmail.com

Website: www.unfari.ac.id

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Jurnal The Gist adalah jurnal yang memuat karya ilmiah berupa artikel di bidang Ilmu sastra dan Bahasa. Jurnal The Gist diterbitkan 2 kali dalam setahun oleh Fakultas Sastra Universitas Alghifari sebagai media untuk menampung karya ilmiah sivitas akademika di lingkungan Fakultas Sastra Universitas Alghifari. Jurnal ini juga membuka peluang bagi penulis dari luar lembaga untuk berkontribusi dalam penulisan karya ilmiah selama masih memiliki bidang ilmu yang sama.

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Telp. 022.7835813 email: unfarisastra@gmail.com website: www.unfari.ac.id



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POWER RELATIONS THROUGH SFL INTERPERSONAL METAFUNCTION IN CHERNOBYL SERIES DIALOGUE

Raihan Gentha Tsany¹, Octavia Chandra Dewi²

^{1,2} English Department, Faculty of Literature, Al-Ghifari University,
Jl. Cisaranten Kulon - Arcamanik No.140, Bandung 40293, Indonesia

Raihangentha21@gmail.com

Abstract: This study aims to analyze how power relations are constructed through spoken language in the television miniseries *Chernobyl* (2019). Utilizing the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach developed by M.A.K. Halliday, with a particular focus on Interpersonal Metafunction, this study examines the systems of Mood and Modality in the characters' dialogues. The main issue addressed is how characters with bureaucratic and military authority use specific grammatical choices to dominate conversations and exert pressure on their subordinates during the crisis. This descriptive qualitative study found that figures in power consistently used the imperative mood and high value modality to eliminate room for negotiation, which linguistically represented the hierarchical power structure of the Soviet Union at that time.

Key words: SFL, interpersonal metafunction, power relations, dialogue, Chernobyl

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana relasi kuasa dikonstruksi melalui bahasa lisan dalam miniseri televisi *Chernobyl* (2019). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) yang digagas oleh M.A.K. Halliday, secara khusus pada Fungsi Interpersonal, penelitian ini membedah sistem Mood (Modus) dan Modality (Modalitas) dalam dialog antar karakter. Masalah pokok yang dibahas adalah bagaimana tokoh-tokoh dengan otoritas birokrasi dan militer menggunakan pilihan tata bahasa tertentu untuk mendominasi percakapan dan menekan bawahan mereka di tengah situasi krisis. Penelitian kualitatif deskriptif ini menemukan bahwa karakter berkuasa secara konsisten menggunakan modus imperatif dan modalitas tingkat tinggi untuk menghilangkan ruang negosiasi, yang mana secara linguistik merepresentasikan struktur kekuasaan hierarkis Uni Soviet pada masa itu.

Kata kunci: SFL, fungsi interpersonal, relasi kuasa, dialog, Chernobyl

INTRODUCTION

Language is never entirely neutral. In everyday interactions, the words we choose, the tone we use, and the grammatical structures we form are heavily influenced by the social context and our relationship with the person we are speaking to (Eggins, 2004). When people communicate, they do not just exchange information; they also

establish, maintain, or challenge social hierarchies (Martin & Rose, 2003). This dynamic becomes highly visible in dramatic texts and screenplays, where dialogue serves as a miniature representation of real-world social structures. A prime example of this can be observed in the historical drama miniseries *Chernobyl* (2019) (Mazin, 2018a). The series is not just about a

nuclear meltdown; it is fundamentally a story about bureaucracy, truth, and the absolute power of the Soviet state over its citizens.

In literary and linguistic studies, analyzing dialogue merely by looking at its literal meaning is not enough. To truly understand how a character dominates another without necessarily using physical force, we need a functional approach to grammar (Thompson, 2014). Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by M.A.K. Halliday (1993), provides the perfect framework for this. Unlike traditional grammar that focuses on right or wrong sentence structures, SFL views language as a resource for making meaning in social contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). SFL proposes that language simultaneously performs three metafunctions: Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual (Eggins, 2004).

This study focuses specifically on the Interpersonal Metafunction. According to Thompson (2014), the interpersonal metafunction is used to enact social relationships and express the speaker's attitudes and judgments. Through the systems of Mood (the type of clause, such as declarative, interrogative, or imperative) and Modality (the speaker's degree of certainty or obligation, such as *can*, *should*, *must*, *will*), we can scientifically measure who holds the power in a conversation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a comprehensive framework for examining how language creates meaning within specific social contexts (Eggins, 2004). In modern linguistic research, SFL has been widely applied to analyze various forms of texts, ranging from promotional discourse (Dewi, Sujatna, & Mahdi, 2019, pp. 246-247) to political communication. By exploring functional dimensions such as the transitivity system, researchers can uncover the meaning behind a clause and analyze the relation between language, power, and ideology (Dewi et al., 2021, pp. 237- 239).

The problem this paper addresses is how these linguistic tools (Mood and Modality) are weaponized by characters in *Chernobyl* (Mazin, 2018a) to force compliance. The aim of this study is to dissect specific interactions particularly between high-ranking officials and lower ranking workers or military personnel to reveal the underlying power dynamics (Martin & Rose, 2003). By understanding this, we can see how the screenplay brilliantly uses interpersonal grammar to reflect the oppressive nature of the regime, proving that power in this narrative is often wielded strictly through linguistic choices.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research applies a descriptive qualitative method (Eggins, 2004). The primary data source is the dialogue transcript from the *Chernobyl* miniseries

created by Craig Mazin (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e).

The qualitative approach is chosen because the analysis requires a deep, contextual interpretation of the text rather than statistical counting (Martin & Rose, 2003). The research focuses on identifying specific utterances that showcase an imbalance of power (Thompson, 2014).

The data analysis technique follows the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework, specifically focusing on the Interpersonal Metafunction (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). First, the selected dialogues are broken down into clauses. Second, each clause is analyzed based on its Mood system to determine if it is a declarative, interrogative, or imperative clause (Eggins, 2004). Third, the clauses are examined for their Modality to identify the level of obligation or inclination expressed by the speakers (Thompson, 2014). Finally, the linguistic findings are interpreted by relating them to the Tenor of the discourse analyzing the power, contact, and affective involvement between the interacting characters to explain how social hierarchy is linguistically established (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interpersonal metafunction in *Chernobyl* (Mazin, 2018b) acts as a crucial tool for characterization and building tension. The dialogue demonstrates that characters with

institutional power do not politely ask for cooperation; they demand it through specific grammatical structures (Eggins, 2004). This section discusses how power is exerted using Mood and Modality.

The Use of Imperative Mood as a Direct Command

A clear example of how power is shown in the series happens in Episode 2 (Mazin, 2018b). Boris Shcherbina, a top government official, is on a helicopter with the scientist Valery Legasov, flying toward the burning reactor. Shcherbina wants to get directly over the open core to get a better look, even though the radiation level is deadly. When the helicopter pilot hesitates, the conversation quickly turns from a simple request into a matter of life and death, as shown in **Table 1** below (Mazin, 2018b).

As seen in **Table 3.1**, Shcherbina uses the imperative mood to show his dominance (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Instead of asking nicely (for example, "*Could you please fly closer?*"), he gives a direct command (Mazin, 2018b). When the pilot tries to explain the safety rules, Shcherbina ignores the safety debate and uses his authority. He threatens to have the pilot shot if he does not follow the order (Mazin, 2018b).

From an SFL perspective, threatening to shoot the pilot is an extreme way of demanding an action (Thompson, 2014). By using the imperative mood in the first sentence, Shcherbina acts as the absolute

commander, while the pilot is just the person who has to follow the order without talking back (Eggins, 2004). The grammar leaves no room for discussion. In the second sentence, he explicitly threatens the pilot using the

declarative mood with a strong modal verb, "*will*" (Mazin, 2018b). This shows the physical power of the government backing Shcherbina's words (Martin & Rose, 2003). The fact that the pilot obeys shows that the relationship between them is very unequal (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The dialogue proves that in this situation, authority is more important than logic or safety, and this is built perfectly through these strong sentences (Mazin, 2018b).

Using Strong Modality to Force Obedience

In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), *Modality* shows how certain a speaker is or how much obligation they put on someone else (Thompson, 2014). While the *Mood* system shows the speaker's role, *Modality* reveals their level of authority (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In the bureaucratic world of *Chernobyl* (Mazin, 2018d), powerful characters rarely use weak modal verbs like *might*, *could*, or *perhaps*. Instead, they use strong modal verbs like *will*, *must*, or *have to* (Eggins, 2004). This leaves no room for the other person to argue.

A great example of this happens when Valery Legasov talks to the KGB First Deputy Chairman, Charkov (Mazin, 2018e). Charkov knows

Legasov might tell the truth about the reactor's fatal flaw, so he uses language to trap him, as shown in **Table 2** (Mazin, 2018e).

As seen in **Table 3.2**, Charkov does not just threaten Legasov; he dictates his future (Mazin, 2018e). By repeating the modal "*will not*", Charkov leaves no room for probability (Thompson, 2014). When Legasov tries to fight back by asking, "*And if I refuse?*", Charkov completely destroys this option (Mazin, 2018e). He replies, "*Why worry about something that isn't going to happen?*" (Mazin, 2018e). Charkov uses strong negative modality to erase Legasov's choices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In this scene, power is not shown through physical violence, but by linguistically deleting the subordinate's options (Martin & Rose, 2003).

This language of forced obedience is also used by local party officials (Mazin, 2018b). When scientist Ulana Khomyuk warns Deputy Secretary Garanin about the radiation, she has the scientific facts, but Garanin has the political power (Mazin, 2018b). When Khomyuk says he must evacuate the city, Garanin ignores the science and says, "*I prefer my opinion to yours*" (Mazin, 2018b). Khomyuk tries to point out his lack of experience, saying he used to work in a shoe factory (Mazin, 2018b). Garanin simply replies, "*Yes. I worked in a shoe factory. And now I'm in charge*" (Mazin, 2018b). The statement "*I'm in charge*" overrides all scientific facts (Eggins, 2004). This proves that political rank controls the

reality of the conversation (Thompson, 2014).

The Context of Situation (Tenor) in the Control Room

The interpersonal metafunction also connects to the *Context of Situation*, specifically *Tenor* (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Tenor is about the relationship between the speakers, including their power (equal or unequal) and their feelings toward each other (Affect) (Eggins, 2004). The explosion of Reactor 4 (Mazin, 2018a) happened because of a very toxic Tenor in the control room.

The relationship between Deputy Chief Engineer Anatoly Dyatlov and his younger workers, Alexandr Akimov and Leonid Toptunov, shows how unequal power leads to disaster (Mazin, 2018e). Toptunov is only 25 years old with four months of experience (Mazin, 2018e), while Dyatlov is the boss. This unequal power is made worse by Dyatlov's abusive behavior (Martin & Rose, 2003). When the reactor's power drops dangerously low, Akimov logically says, "*We have to shut it all the way down*" (Mazin, 2018e). However, Dyatlov rejects this safety rule, as analyzed in **Table 3** (Mazin, 2018e).

As shown in **Table 3.3**, when Akimov says the test is not safe, Dyatlov uses a chilling declarative sentence: "*If I say it's safe, it's safe*" (Mazin, 2018e). This shows a pure authoritarian Tenor (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Safety is no longer a real fact; it is whatever the boss decides (Thompson, 2014).

To make sure they obey, Dyatlov threatens their careers (Mazin, 2018e). He tells them if they don't do it, they will never work at any nuclear plant ever again (Mazin, 2018e). The Affect (emotion) here is cold and hostile (Eggins, 2004). Akimov and Toptunov are trapped in a Tenor where saying "no" means their careers are over (Martin & Rose, 2003). They are forced to obey the imperative command "*Raise the power*" (Mazin, 2018e), which ultimately causes the explosion (Mazin, 2018a). Using SFL, we can see that the disaster was not just a machine failure, but the result of a toxic relationship where power silenced the truth (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the *Chernobyl* miniseries dialogue (Mazin, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e) using M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1993; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), it is clear that language is used as a tool for control (Eggins, 2004; Thompson, 2014). By looking at the Interpersonal Metafunction, this study shows how characters with political and military power constantly use the imperative mood and high value modality to dominate conversations and stop any arguments (Martin & Rose, 2003).

The findings show that power in the series is very unequal (Mazin, 2018b, 2018e). Bosses like Shcherbina, Charkov, and Dyatlov do not negotiate or use weak modal verbs (Mazin,

2018b, 2018c, 2018e). Instead, they give direct orders and use strong modals like "will" and "must" to force their workers to obey (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Also, the analysis of Tenor shows that in the Soviet system, political rank is always more important than scientific facts and safety (Eggins, 2004). Workers like Legasov, Akimov, and the helicopter pilot are treated simply as tools of the state (Mazin, 2018b, 2018c). They lose their voice

because of verbal threats and bureaucratic power (Thompson, 2014). Ultimately, the dialogue in *Chernobyl* (Mazin, 2018a) perfectly reflects a broken political system. It proves that the disaster was caused just as much by toxic communication and abusive power as it was by a broken nuclear reactor (Martin & Rose, 2003). **Table 3.1** Mood Analysis of Shcherbina's Command to the Pilot

Character	Clause	Subject	Finite	Mood Type	Modality
Shcherbina	Get us over the reactor core	(You)	(Do)	Imperative	-
Shcherbina	or I'll have you shot	I	'll (will)	Declarative	High value

Table 3.2 Modality Analysis of Charkov's Decree

Character	Clause	Subject	Finite	Mood Type	Modality
Charkov	You will not meet or communicate with either one of them ever again	You	will not	Declarative	High value
Charkov	You will not communicate with anyone about Chernobyl ever again	You	will not	Declarative	High value

Table 3.3 Mood and Tenor Analysis of Dyatlov's Order

Character	Clause	Subject	Finite	Mood Type	Modality
Dyatlov	If I say it's safe, it's safe	I / It	say / is	Declarative	-
Dyatlov	Raise the power	(You)	(Do)	Imperative	-

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