

Audience interaction in Trubar's sermon on faith: a systemic functional analysis*

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Abstract

This paper examines the interactional aspects of Trubar's sermon on faith from the *Catechism* of 1550 (2008), analysing how the preacher engages with his audience through language. Drawing on Hyland's concepts of stance and engagement (2005) and Cloran's concept of rhetorical units (1994), the study examines the dominant interactional rhetorical units in Trubar's sermon from a discourse semantics perspective. The findings indicate that the rhetorical units of Reflection and Avocation signal the presence of the author and/or the addressee in the text, while the rhetorical units of Generalization, Conjecture, Rhetorical questions, and Reported speech function to engage the addressee and encourage adherence to Jesus' teachings. Through these linguistic devices, Trubar, as the preacher, establishes a strong interactive connection with his silent audience.

Keywords: interaction, rhetorical unit, Trubar's sermon, systemic functional linguistics

Interakcijske značilnosti Trubarjeve pridige o veri: sistemsko-funkcijska analiza

Prispevek obravnava interakcijske značilnosti Trubarjeve pridige o veri iz *Katekizma* 1550 (2008) tako, da razkriva, s katerimi jezikovnimi izbirami avtor nagovarja poslušalstvo. Z uporabo Hylandovih pojmov stališča in sodelovanja (2005) ter pojma retorične enote, ki jo predlaga Cloran (1994), opišemo prevladujoče interakcijske retorične enote v Trubarjevi pridigi z vidika besedilne semantike. Ugotovitve potrjujejo, da sta refleksija in zahteva retorični enoti, ki označujeta avtorjevo in/ali naslovnikovo besedilno navzočnost, medtem ko retorične enote posplošitev, domneva, retorično vprašanje in premo poročanje izražajo sodelovanje z naslovniki in jih spodbujajo, naj živijo v skladu z Jezusovim naukom. S temi jezikovnimi sredstvi Trubar-pridigar ustvarja močno sporočevalno vez z molčečim občinstvom.

Ključne besede: interakcija, retorična enota, Trubarjeva pridiga, sistemsko-funkcijsko jezikoslovje

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1 Introduction

Over the past 40 years, scholars in the humanities, social sciences, and linguistics have explored the roles of authors and audiences in texts under the concept of *metadiscourse*.¹ Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), metadiscourse refers to the social interactions conveyed through writing and speech – both between authors and their texts and between authors and audiences (e.g., Vande Kopple 1985; Hyland and Tse 2004). It highlights the inherently social character of communication (Hyland 2005; Dafouz-Milne 2008) and resonates with Bakhtin's view that all discourse is, to some extent, dialogic, even in monologue (Bakhtin 1979, 94–96).

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism closely corresponds with SFL theory, which conceptualizes language as interaction (Halliday 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). Halliday, an early proponent of the interpersonal metafunction², states:

“[i]nterpersonally, a text is a series of exchanges between speaker and addressee – even if it is a one-sided monologue that is essentially a series of statements acknowledged silently by the addressee.” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 45)

Within SFL, Hyland (2005; 2008) introduced a key model for investigating the interactive nature of communication, which has gained widespread acceptance in metadiscourse research over the past 20 years. My analysis of Trubar's sermon on faith from the *Catechism of 1550* (2008) contributes to this field by expanding theoretical models across diverse languages and registers. To demonstrate this, I examine the interactive mechanisms in Trubar's sermon, a compelling choice for two reasons. First, sermons are inherently persuasive, designed to engage and influence audiences, making them ideal for such analysis. Second, Trubar's sermon is historically

1 The terminology surrounding *metadiscourse* is diverse and not uniformly adopted across disciplines or theoretical frameworks. Related concepts may appear under alternative labels such as *metatext*, *metalanguage*, or *metapragmatics*, depending on the field or approach. For example, text linguistics might refer to *metatextual markers*, while pragmatics emphasizes *metapragmatic cues* that guide interpretation. Hyland (2017, 17) describes *metadiscourse* as a “fuzzy term” that has come to encompass a broad range of interpersonal and textual functions, serving as a form of metalanguage through which writers organize their discourse and engage with readers. Despite this terminological variation, these perspectives share the view that communication involves not only propositional content but also reflexive commentary on how that content is structured, interpreted, and socially situated.

2 The *interpersonal metafunction*, as defined in SFL, refers to the role of language in enacting social interactions and negotiating relationships between speakers and listeners (or writers and readers). It concerns how speakers express attitudes, judgments, and engage with others through choices in mood, modality, and evaluation, positioning language as a tool for interaction rather than merely for representing experience or organizing discourse (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 29–45).

significant as the first Slovenian-authored text explicitly designated a sermon, offering a valuable starting point for investigating the diachronic development of interactive features. This paper positions that line of inquiry as a promising trajectory for future research within the Slovenian context.

2 Literature review

Linguistic interest in metadiscourse has grown steadily since the mid-2000s, with an increasing emphasis on empirically testing theoretical assumptions. Research has addressed a wide range of genres, including academic texts (e.g., Hyland 1998; Hyland and Tse 2004), advertising and media discourse (e.g., Fuertes-Olivera et al. 2001; Dafouz-Milne 2008), business communication (e.g., De Groot et al. 2016), and parliamentary debates (e.g., Ilie 2003). In Slovenian linguistics as well, metadiscourse has been explored across various contexts. Pisanski Peterlin (2005) examined its use in English and Slovenian scientific articles; Verdonik (2007) analysed its role in spoken interaction; and Lengar Verovnik (2015) focused on lexical hedging in radio interviews.

In parallel, a substantial body of research in historical pragmatics has examined how language was used in earlier periods to perform interpersonal and textual functions, with particular attention to speech acts. These studies offer critical insights into how communicative intentions were encoded in historical texts and provide a valuable foundation for understanding metadiscursive strategies. Kohnen (2007, 2008), for example, investigates directive speech acts in Early Modern English sermons – texts typically written for oral delivery – demonstrating how such acts often fulfilled metadiscursive functions by guiding attention, structuring discourse, and facilitating interaction. Building on this intersection between pragmatics and metadiscourse, Mäkinen (2022) analyses Early Modern English medical recipes by combining Aristotelian rhetorical appeals – ethos, pathos, and logos – with a metadiscursive framework. Drawing on data from the *Corpus of Early Modern English Medical Texts*, he shows how these instructional genres blended informative and persuasive goals, with quantitative analysis underscoring the rhetorical sophistication of the texts.

Shifting from rhetorical function to historical change, several studies have explored the diachronic development of metadiscourse within specific genres. Chaemsathong (2013) examines how 16th-century witchcraft pamphleteers constructed persuasive authorial identities through metadiscursive resources, while his subsequent analysis (2014) of 18th-century courtroom discourse demonstrates how

stance markers, personal pronouns, and reported speech were used to influence jury perception. Collectively, these studies highlight how genre-specific communicative goals shaped the evolution of metadiscursive practices. The only diachronic study focused exclusively on sermons is Boggel's (2009) functional analysis, which examines English sermons from the Middle English period through to the Early Modern English period. Her study categorizes metadiscourse into four types – intertextual, text-organizing, instructional, and stance-marking – and illustrates how preachers employed these resources to structure discourse and guide audience interpretation. By tracing developments across several centuries, Boggel reveals rhetorical sensitivity to shifting historical and social contexts. While her typology differs from the interpersonal framework adopted in this study (Hyland 2005), her findings reinforce the broader insight that metadiscursive practices in sermons are both contextually and rhetorically shaped.

Amid growing interest in religious discourse, recent studies have increasingly adopted established theoretical models – particularly Hyland's interpersonal framework – to examine how interpersonal meaning is constructed. A notable example is Malmström (2016), who applies Hyland's model to a corpus of 150 contemporary Easter sermons, identifying frequent use of questions, imperatives, personal pronouns, and hedges. The present study builds on this work by using the same framework but extends the analysis to explore how semantic and lexicogrammatical levels interact in the realization of metadiscursive resources in a historical context (see Section 3).

In Slovenian scholarship, sermons have primarily been approached from a literary-historical perspective, often examined as transitional forms in the evolution of Slovenian narrative prose (Kmecl 1975). In this context, Trubar's sermon on faith from the *Catechism* of 1550 (1935, 202–243) has received limited theoretical attention beyond stylistic commentary (Sajovic 1986) and theological interpretation (Rajhman 1977). By contrast, from a linguistic perspective, the rhetorical and stylistic features of Slovenian Protestant texts have been more substantially addressed. Pogorelec (1972) first identified the rhetorical structure of Trubar's sentences, noting his use of double and triple formulae – an observation that influenced later studies (Pogačnik 1976; Seitz 1995; Ahačič 2007). Among the rhetorical devices discussed, rhetorical questions and biblical quotations (Ahačič 2007, 305) are particularly significant for understanding author–audience interaction in Trubar's sermon.

Taken together, international and Slovenian studies underscore the importance of analysing how Trubar constructs and manages author–audience interaction in his sermon. The following section outlines SFL theoretical framework adopted in this

study to examine how Trubar employs metadiscursive strategies to shape and sustain audience engagement within the rhetorical landscape of the Slovenian Reformation.

3 Theoretical framework and research design

Hyland (2005) and Hyland and Tse (2004) developed an SFL-based model for investigating writer-reader interaction, distinguishing between interactive resources which guide information flow, and interactional resources, which engage the reader and shape the writer's persona. Each includes several subcategories (Hyland and Tse 2004, 169). Applying this model to contemporary English sermons, Malmström (2016) found that preachers use over three times more interactional than interactive metadiscourse, with engagement markers being the most frequent – occurring 39.5 times per 1,000 words and accounting for 43% of all metadiscourse. These findings highlight the centrality of interactional features in sermon discourse and provide the rationale for the present analysis.

While Hyland's model offers a valuable lexicogrammatical approach to writer–reader interaction, its focus on discrete linguistic items presents limitations for analysing extended texts in languages other than English. Applying the engagement and stance categories to Slovenian proved challenging, particularly because engagement markers constitute an open set of expressions whose grammatical and lexical realizations vary across languages. As Hyland and Tse (2004) note, these must be identified manually, through corpus searches and text analysis tailored to the target language and genre. Since no comparable inventory exists for Slovenian, a new list of potential metadiscourse expressions had to be compiled from scratch – an effort that was further complicated by the lack of robust concordancing tools for Slovenian.

To overcome these limitations and enrich the analysis of interpersonal meaning, this study incorporates additional tools from SFL. Specifically, it draws on Cloran's (1994) model of message semantics, which connects lexicogrammatical choices with human experience through two central notions: Entity and Event. This discourse-semantic perspective allows interactional resources to be interpreted not only as isolated items, but as semantically coherent rhetorical units embedded within larger stretches of text.

In Cloran's model, the Entity typically functions as the Subject in the clause and refers to different participant types: interactants (e.g., speaker and addressee), generalized persons, absent individuals, or co-present entities. In sermonic discourse, the roles of interactants are reconfigured as preacher and congregation. The Event

is expressed in the verb group and anchored in time or modulated by features such as probability, necessity, hypothesis, or habituality. These parameters position actions and experiences within specific experiential and interpersonal contexts. Cloran (1994, 243) maps these semantic options across experiential, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions.³

In this study, attention is focused on experiential semantics, specifically the role of the Central Entity and Event Orientation. As Cloran (1994, 234–242) explains, the configuration of these features determines how rhetorical meaning is realized. For example, in the clause *We imprison ourselves in our own hell*, the central entity *we* refers to the preacher and congregation (co-present interactants), while the event is expressed in the habitual present. This configuration corresponds to what Cloran calls a Reflection – a rhetorical unit that constructs shared beliefs or recurrent actions.

To operationalize this framework, the analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we selected Trubar's sermon on faith from the *Catechism* of 1550 (1935, 202–243). Given the linguistic and interpretative challenges of working with a 16th-century text, we used the modern Slovenian translation (Trubar 2008), which allowed us to apply a Slovenian part-of-speech tagger (Jakopin and Bizjak 1997).⁴ Noun and verb forms were automatically extracted from the linear sequence of the sermon, enabling the construction of a structured dataset.

In the second stage, we compiled a table of lexicogrammatical characteristics and manually assigned a rhetorical label to each clause. Based on Cloran's semantic parameters, each clause was annotated according to its central entity and event orientation. This process made it possible to distinguish meaningful units of interaction and provided a fine-grained perspective on how interpersonal alignment is semantically constructed throughout the sermon.

Through this approach, six prominent types of interactional rhetorical units were identified. The first is the Reflection, which conveys shared beliefs or habitual actions involving both preacher and congregation, often marked by expressions such as *we know* or *we believe*. The Avocation exhorts the audience to act, typically using imperative forms or modal verbs such as *must*. In contrast, the Generalization introduces

3 In SFL, the *experiential metafunction* relates to how language construes our experience of the world, including processes and the participants who execute them. The *interpersonal metafunction* concerns interaction and the enactment of social roles and relationships, including relationships between speakers and audiences. Finally, the *textual metafunction* joins together elements of discourse, weaving separate parts into a coherent whole. See Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) for a detailed discussion.

4 Another reason for selecting the modern version is the availability of an English translation (Trubar 2008a) alongside the modern Slovenian version (Trubar 2008).

broad social roles or types – such as a believer – and presents particular behaviours as typical or expected. The Conjecture introduces hypothetical or conditional scenarios, often used to pre-empt objections or invite contemplation. Rhetorical questions are not intended to elicit answers, but rather to provoke reflection or subtly shape the listener's understanding. Finally, Reported speech brings in external voices – especially biblical or divine sources – to confer authority and moral weight.

The following section presents a detailed analysis of the lexicogrammatical and semantic features that define these rhetorical units in Trubar's sermon. Drawing on Cloran's systemic networks, it illustrates how each unit was identified and interpreted, offering a consistent framework for capturing their interactional significance.

4 Analysis of dominant interactional rhetorical units in the data

The analysis of Trubar's sermon focuses on the dominant interactional rhetorical units. The following descriptions illustrate how the configuration of the central entity (realized through the Subject's interpersonal role) and event orientation (expressed in the verbal group) determine the types of interactional rhetorical units. These units reflect the presence of the author or addressee in the text or guide the listener in various ways.

4.1 Reflection

The first interactional rhetorical unit in Trubar's sermon is Reflection, which expresses typical states of an interactant, as shown in example (1).

(1)⁵

/.../ **kakor mi vsi** vemo in verujemo, da je Bog /.../ (Trubar 2008, 9)

'.../ just as **we all** know and believe that God /.../ exists /.../' (Trubar 2008a, 9)

At the level of discourse semantics, the rhetorical unit Reflection is defined by its central entity, which refers to the interactants – *the preacher and the listeners*⁶ – and

5 In this and the following examples, which illustrate the semantic and linguistic features of an entity in the role of Subject and event orientation realized in the verbal group, the markings are as follows: entities are in bold, while events are underlined.

6 In Slovenian, the entity interactant is lexicogrammatically realized through first-person plural verb endings (e.g., *vemo*) or a combination of pronouns and verb endings (e.g., *mi vemo*). In English, it is realized through first-person plural pronouns (e.g., *we*).

an event characterized by a temporal reference concurrent with the moment of speaking.⁷ In addition to simultaneity, this event is also marked by the feature of habituality,⁸ understood as the regular, repeated nature of the action or state described. Cloran (1994, 212–213) identifies habituality as one of the systems of semantic choices for predicate events that enables the formation of generic statements. These statements do not describe isolated occurrences, but rather refer to patterns of behaviour or states perceived as typical or recurring. In his analysis of Slovenian, Orešnik (1994, 151) presents a compatible perspective, emphasizing that general statements characteristically refer to law-like, regularly occurring situations rather than singular, specific instances. Thus, habituality functions as a key semantic feature in the textual construction of Reflection, linking individual discourse units to broader social norms and shared experiential knowledge.

In Table 1, the semantic characteristics of the rhetorical unit Reflection are schematized using Cloran's semantic networks for entity and event (Cloran 1994, 221, 242).

Table 1. Criterial semantic features of Rhetorical Unit Reflection

Rhetorical Unit	Central Entity	Event Orientation
Reflection	interactant	concurrent; habitual

Using the rhetorical device of Reflection, Trubar emphasizes shared experiences (e.g., *we know, we believe*), fostering a sense of equality between preacher and believers. This underscores their equal standing before God as members of a single body – the ‘church’ (Van Seters 1991, 269). These Reflections serve two purposes: (1) downplaying differences within the religious community while highlighting shared beliefs; and (2) strengthening the bond between the preacher and the believers, reinforcing their unity in relation to God.

4.2 Avocation

The second interactional rhetorical unit identified in Trubar's sermon is Avocation. This unit directs the interactant by conveying a strong sense of obligation, as illustrated in example (2).

7 In Slovenian, temporal reference is lexicogrammatically realized by the present tense, while in English, it is realized by the simple present tense.

8 For the lexicogrammatical realization of habituality in Slovenian, see Orešnik (1994, 149–152) and Bizjak (2005, 64–67); for English, see Cloran (1994, 212–222).

(2)

In **vsi** se moramo dobro zavedati, da je vera kakor roka, mošnja ali kakšna druga posoda, s katero se oprimemo Jezusovega imetja, ga vzamemo in sprejmemo. (Trubar 2008, 21)

‘And **all of us** must be fully aware that faith is like a hand, with which we grasp Jesus’ property, take it and receive it.’ (Trubar 2008a, 17)

The central entity of Avocation refers to the co-present interactants – *the preacher and the addressee* – lexicogrammatically realized by the phrase *all of us*. The event orientation emphasizes obligation, lexicogrammatically expressed through the word *must*.

Table 2 outlines the key semantic characteristics for identifying the rhetorical unit Avocation.

Table 2. Criterial semantic features of Rhetorical Unit Avocation

Rhetorical Unit	Central Entity	Event Orientation
Avocation	interactant	concurrent; obligation

The rhetorical unit Avocation, essential to shaping the interactional dynamics of Trubar’s sermon, directs the audience towards an understanding of faith by conveying a strong sense of obligation.

4.3 Generalization

Unlike Reflection and Avocation, which involve interactants, the rhetorical unit Generalization refers to categories of common things, naming general classes rather than specific individuals. Example (3) illustrates its role in the preacher’s reasoning.

(3)

Človek, ki veruje, ima najprej to dobro navado in mišljenje, da Božjo besedo ljubi, jo rad posluša ali sam bere, jo ima za resnico in vanjo veruje. (Trubar 2008, 15)

‘First of all, a **believer** has this good habit and way of thinking that **he** loves God’s word, loves to listen to it, or read it himself, considers it true and believes it.’ (Trubar 2008a, 13)

Semantically, Generalization highlights a generalized entity (e.g., *believer*⁹) and an event that is both habitual and concurrent with the moment of speaking, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Criterial semantic features of Rhetorical Unit Generalization

Rhetorical Unit	Central Entity	Event Orientation
Generalization	generalized	concurrent; habitual

By using Generalizations, Trubar presents his views on believers (example 3) and other class entities as common knowledge. These Generalizations, woven throughout the sermon on faith, ensure that the audience recognizes timeless truths and shared values.

4.4 Conjecture

In the rhetorical unit Conjecture, Trubar speculates on what might or might not even-tuate, as illustrated in example (4).

(4)

Če pa zdaj, v tem življenju ne prejmemo vsega, kar nam je Bog obljudil, bomo to gotovo prejeli po tem življenju, v nebesih. (Trubar 2008, 13)

‘If we do not receive everything God has promised us now in this life, we will certainly receive it in heaven after this life.’ (Trubar 2008a, 11)

Conjecture is realized through two clauses: the main event must indicate possibility or likelihood, while the supplementary message expresses a condition. The central entity is irrelevant to its identification. Table 4 summarizes the event orientation criteria for Conjecture.

9 The category *believer* functions here not as a reference to a specific individual, nor to “human” in general as a biological category, but rather as a generalized social identity. As Cloran (1994, 237–239) argues, generalization in rhetorical units often involves typical representatives of a social group rather than abstract, universal humans. In this sense, generalization occurs through the evocation of socially recognizable roles – such as the believer –whose behaviours and values are construed as typical and shared. Similarly, Orešnik (1994, 150) notes that noun phrases are used generically when they refer to any member of a particular type, rather than to a specific individual. This rhetorical strategy is consistent with the sermonic discourse, where participant types are mobilized to construct shared truths within the discourse community.

Table 4. Criterial semantic features of the Rhetorical Unit Conjecture

Rhetorical Unit	Central Entity	Event Orientation
Conjecture	/	forecast; probability; hypothetical

In Trubar's sermon, rhetorical units of Conjecture are used to encourage believers to live according to Jesus' teachings.

4.5 Rhetorical question

Trubar effectively engages his audience through the use of questions. Even in sermons, where no direct response is expected, interrogatives establish a connection with the addressee. Rhetorical questions, in particular, draw attention to specific aspects of the discourse. Trubar's use of Rhetorical questions to involve the audience is illustrated in example (5).

(5)

In kako naj jemo njegovo telo in pijemo njegovo kri? (Trubar 2008, 19)

‘And how should we eat his body and drink his blood?’ (Trubar 2008a, 16)

The rhetorical unit Rhetorical question features an interrogative statement about event options, with the type of central entity being irrelevant to its identification (Table 5).

Table 5. Criterial semantic features of the Rhetorical Unit Rhetorical question

Rhetorical Unit	Central Entity	Event Orientation
Rhetorical question	/	interrogative

Rhetorical questions are Trubar's primary means of acknowledging the addressee and encouraging audience engagement.

4.6 Reported speech

Trubar not only speaks in his own voice but also incorporates those of God, Jesus, and other scriptural authorities through reported speech, as illustrated in example (6).

(6)

Ježus pravi: “Bog je tako ljubil svet, da je dal svojega edninega Sina, da nihče, ki veruje vanj, ne bo pogubljen, temveč bo imel večno življenje /.../” (Jn 3,16–18). (Trubar 2008, 21)

‘**Jesus says** “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that no-one who believes in him will perish but will have eternal life /.../” (John 3:16-18)’ (Trubar 2008a, 16)

Although we cannot examine every voice Trubar introduces through Reported speech, it is worth noting that the words of Christ take centre stage in Trubar’s sermon, as He is the ultimate Christian authority.

Semantically, the rhetorical unit Reported speech comprises at least two clauses: the reported clause and the quoted clause (enclosed in quotation marks). It allows the speaker to convey information about the original speech event, particularly absent entities and non-habitual events, as outlined in Table 6.

Table 6. Criterial semantic features of the Rhetorical Unit Reported speech

Rhetorical Unit		Central Entity	Event Orientation
Reported speech	Reported clause	absent entity	concurrent/prior; non-habitual
	Quoted clause	/	/

Reported speech is a key interactional feature of Trubar’s sermon. By citing biblical authorities, he strengthens his arguments and persuades believers to embrace a life of faith.

5 Conclusion

This paper offers a deeper insight into Trubar’s sermon as an interaction between the preacher and his audience. It examines how the preacher employs various strategies to engage a silent congregation and incorporates interactional elements into an otherwise monologic structure. The findings suggest that specific rhetorical units – such as Reflection and Avocation – signal the presence of both author and addressee in the text. Meanwhile, Generalization, Conjecture, Rhetorical questions, and Reported speech actively engage the audience and persuade them to live according to Jesus’s

teachings. These two groups of linguistic devices not only shape the interactive nature of Trubar's sermon, but also reflect the genre conventions of sermonic texts. As a form of argumentative discourse, the sermon relies on credible and persuasive arguments and interpretations. Thus, the preacher must consider his audience, anticipate their questions, doubts, and challenges, and address them through various rhetorical means. By employing these linguistic strategies, Trubar establishes a strong interactional link with his silent audience.

This study has not only uncovered the interactional features of Trubar's 16th-century sermon to some extent, but has also demonstrated that engagement resources, while typically analysed through the lens of lexicogrammar, can also be examined from a discourse semantic perspective.

Although this study is based on a detailed analysis of a historical case, expanding the scope to a larger corpus and incorporating sermons from different periods would likely yield more generalizable findings and stronger conclusions.

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