



Appraisal Theory and Interpreting Political Speech

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Abstract

Appraisal Theory can be used to study the semiotic content of formal speeches. This paper suggests there are important differences in the modes used at different stages as a speech shifts overall tone or purpose. While Affect is common across the speech structure, Judgement is more commonly found in sections that can be seen as instances of expected politeness towards the intended audience. By using such modes, the speaker is effectively inviting agreement with their overall presentation. For this paper, two speeches by Ban Ki Moon were studied. The first in 2006 is his acceptance speech and the second, in 2016, on leaving his role as Secretary General of the United Nations.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics

Introduction

Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) focusses on the emotional content of speech and text (and images where appropriate) in building up both the meaning intended by the speaker (or author) and as interpreted by the audience. When applied to a formal speech this allows consideration of how the speech is structured, whether the goal is to bring the audience to agreement (Hamby & Jones, 2022; Shahmir, Rasool, & Irshad, 2023) or to exclude those not already convinced (Zhou, 2023).

Two speeches were selected for this paper. The first was the speech given by Ban Ki Moon in 2006 (Moon, 2006) on formally taking up his role as Secretary General of the United Nations. This can be broadly sub-divided

into four sub-sections: his opening remarks which include indications of appreciation at his appointment and praise for his predecessor; a discussion of his appointment process and perceived flaws he now wishes to address; and, his ambitions for the UN under his leadership. The second speech was his farewell address in 2016 (Moon, 2016). Again, this can be subdivided into sections where he acknowledges the work of others, reviews his own term of office, a lengthy discussion of his personal feelings on leaving the role and a restatement of gratitude to those present.

One practical challenge is that while Appraisal Theory offers a framework there are challenges in its practical application (Troiano, Oberländer, & Klinger, 2023; Wei, Wherrity, & Zhang, 2015) with this not just including issues of coding but also the basic terminology in use (Aian, 2017; Mirzaaghabeyk, 2022). Despite this the analysis does point to how different emotions are invoked, or reflected, across the different sections of a speech (Roseman & Smith, 2001). Of note, in both these cases, the speaker seeks to fit in with the social norms of courtesy and politeness that are believed to characterise the institution (Aian, 2017; Hofmann, Troiano, Sassenberg, & Klinger, 2020). This gives a pattern of emotions different to those to be found when the speaker has little or no interest in engaging with those who are unlikely to agree with him in the first place (Ross & Caldwell, 2020; Zhou, 2023).

Literature Review

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1978) focusses on the semiotic structure of language (Soo-Guan Khoo, Nourbakhsh, & Na, 2012) rather than grammar and other aspects of meaning making leading to a focus on what known as interpersonal semantics. In many contexts, the goal of text (or a speech) is to generate an emotional response. There may be elements of information giving, of meeting social sensibilities and expectations but the end goal is often emotional. Often this can be for the author to be seen as likeable and authoritative which in turn makes their analysis of any problem and proposed solution more likely to be acceptable. So the language chosen and wider speech structure is important to maintain interpersonal relationships (Hamby & Jones, 2022), adopt a stance, and evaluate and construct an identification as a likeable, trustworthy, individual (Shahmir, et al., 2023). This suggests that patterns of speech have considerable bearing on their interpretation by their intended audience.

Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) addresses this dynamic by exploring both the emotions invoked by the speaker and how these are understood by the listener. It also brings in an important social context both in that this understanding relates to prior knowledge and attitudes but also as to what is expected. So the two speeches studied in this paper both have

large sections of what can be called politeness, as the speaker either praises his predecessor (Moon, 2006) or, on leaving the job ten years later, those who have worked with him (Moon, 2016).

These elements are important scaffolding for the rest of the speech in that they are socially expected and if missing would alter any perception of the core message. Political speeches can be seen as a specific form of discourse since it is presumably intended to provide information, gain support and create a wider narrative. This makes the emotions both in the speech and of the likely audience important (Zhou, 2023). Also note how contrived formal speeches often are as they are designed with a purpose (Bolouri, 2008) and, for an important figure, partially written by other professionals.

When applied in practice the process of appraisal is often broken down into Attitude, Judgement and Appreciation. Some applications of Appraisal Theory use different titles for this process such as Affect, Judgement and Appreciation (Aian, 2017). A further complication is the use of a variety of coding systems when it is actually applied to textual analysis (Wei, et al., 2015). In general, the theory is not predictive in the sense that a given criteria will dominate but the original assumption was that affect was particularly important as the main driver of emotional responses.

Attitude is used to capture this process of understanding the text and an emotional response. This response can either be that intended by the author or attributed by the reader. As a result emotions emerge from our appraisal of the text, where relevant, the resulting action choices, and any physiological reaction (Moors, Van de Cruys, & Pourtois, 2021; Roseman & Smith, 2001). In some situations the adoption of an emotional response can see little or no active cognition but in others there is a need to assess what is being said and then form a response (Briñol et al., 2018). White (2005) characterized this appraisal framework as “the language of attitude, arguability and interpersonal positioning”.

Judgement is the process of evaluation, originally of character of an individual or the reliability of their intended message. Typical emotional responses are shown through qualifying adjectives such as ‘honest’ or ‘unreliable’ (Križan, 2016). So, a politician who wishes to influence an audience will tend to use a pattern of delivery that fits their expectations. Often this will seek to create an image of reasonableness and plausibility (Moors, et al., 2021) but there are examples where the speaker will deliberately denigrate parts of a wider society so as to gain support from potential supporters. In effect, judgement can come from meeting wider social norms or rejecting them to emphasise their status as an outsider challenging the system (Ross & Caldwell, 2020; Zhou, 2023). This does lead to some ambiguity as to quite which process is being followed, an issue

common across the use of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005; Page, 2003).

Appreciation (Watson & Spence, 2007) also has a wider social aspect as both creator and viewer will draw on the context (either within the text or in wider society) to inform their understanding and interpretation (Coffin, 2003). In response to a speech this can invoke pre-held beliefs that a given politician is acceptable or not or can be situational, responding to this particular instance. But overall Appreciation may either precondition the likely response or provide information missing from the actual image to come to an understanding.

Taken together, Appraisal Theory is “concerned with evaluation-the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers are aligned” (Martin and Rose 78). It achieves this by offering a framework to explore emotional processing (Soo-Guan Khoo, et al., 2012) both by the active speaker seeking to create attitudes (Mirzaaghabeyk, 2022) and creates a framework of audience emotional engagement (Hamby & Jones, 2022) as the speaker makes “use of language resources in their speeches to convey emotions, judgments, and appreciation” (Mirzaaghabeyk, 2022, p.3).

Research Methods

Research into the semiotic modes in a speech often takes on both a qualitative approach as the key parts are interpreted using the concepts of Appraisal Theory but also some degree of quantitative investigation derived by counting the incidence of attitudinal resources and how this may contribute to either different parts of the speech or, indeed, different speeches (Bolouri, 2008; Hamby & Jones, 2022; Shahmir, et al., 2023)

One enduring challenge in this field is the construction of lexicons (Troiano, et al., 2023) and frameworks. The task of emotion analysis is commonly formulated as classification or regression in which textual units (documents, paragraphs, sentences, words) are mapped to a predefined reference system, (Hofmann, et al., 2020). As noted above, even at the theoretical level, Appraisal Theory has somewhat different descriptions of its components and this becomes more complex when detailed coding structures are used. Identifying the different types of emotions and finding applications for this more subtle kind of sentiment analysis represent the next frontier in automatic sentiment analysis research (Soo-Guan Khoo, et al., 2012).

A further challenge is to define the unit of analysis. Some studies (Soo-Guan Khoo, et al., 2012) break the speech down into what are identified as key blocks, sometimes not even the size of a discrete grammatical section. This allows considerable detail in terms of the interplay between speaker and audience but creates problems in turn. First

the decision to select this or that block is a judgement in itself and may see focus on say the policy element of a speech but miss out the role of conventional signifiers such as thanking the audience. In this study, the decision was made to analyse the speech by sentence.

Very few had no coding as they were short and others had multiple codes attributed as they sought to present multiple elements of the Appraisal Theory framework. Aian (2017) splits the three main sub-groups into positive and negative emotions such as happiness and unhappiness. Thus, he created a framework for affect as:

Table 1: The Affect System (Aian, 2017, p.9)

The Affect System

Affect	Surge(of behavior)	Disposition	P/N
Happiness	Cheer	laugh, rejoice, smile	Positive
	Affection	hug, embrace	
Unhappiness	Misery	cry, wail, whimper	Negative
	Antipathy	abuse, curse, revile	
Security	Confidence	proclaim, declare	Positive
	Trust	entrust, believe	
Insecurity	Disquiet	shaking, restless	Negative
	Surprise	start, faint, collapse	
Satisfaction	Interest	attentive, industrious	Positive
	Pleasure	reward, praise	
Dissatisfaction	Ennui	yawn, fidget	Negative
	Displeasure	scold, blame, caution	

As the second subset of Attitude, Judgment deals with attitudes towards behavior and has a positive and negative dimension corresponding to positive and negative Judgment on behavior. Under Judgment, human behaviors are evaluated according to social expectations, shared values, social norms as well as laws, rules and regulations. According to different evaluative standards, Judgment System can be classified into two broad categories, defined as Social Esteem and Social Sanction

Table 2: Judgement System (Aian, 2017)

The Judgment System

Judgment	Positive	Negative
Social Esteem	Normality	normal, stable, natural
	Capacity	fit, mature, clever, expert
	Tenacity	brave, careful, reliable, loyal
Social Sanction	Veracity	honest, credible, frank
	Propriety	caring, modest, generous

Appreciation makes assessments of the ‘things’, including the things human beings make and the performances they give as well as natural phenomena that are worth evaluating. Being identical with Affect and Judgment, Appreciation can also be recognized as positive and negative evaluative resources. And it can be grouped into three sub-types: Reaction, Composition and Value.

Table 3: Appreciation System (Aian, 2017)

The Appreciation System		Positive	Negative
Reaction	Impact	exciting, notable, lively	dull, boring, tedious
	Quality	fine, good, splendid	bad, nasty, ugly
Composition	Balance	unified, logical, balanced	irregular, flawed
	Complexity	simple, pure, precise	unclear, plain
Valuation		deep, creative, authentic	shallow, fake, worthless

This framework was largely adopted in this study with one important alteration. Direct opposites such as Happiness/Unhappiness were conflated for two reasons. First since the actual coding shows whether the emotion is positive or negative the distinction is not really needed. More importantly, Aian (2017) tends to frame negative emotions as undesirable. This is too simplistic, emotions such as fear can be a useful spur to action, disgust about something happening in the world can be a prime driver in creating a viable response.

Data Analysis

Two speeches by the former UN leader Ban Ki-Moon were compared to explore how semiotic modes and the related emotions vary according to his purpose, audience and the structure of the speech. The first was his acceptance speech in December 2006 (Moon, 2006) and the second on leaving office at the end of 2016 (Moon, 2016). Both were formal presentations to the wider UN Assembly and to UN staff.

The coding was done at the sentence level to avoid ambiguity about the placement of sub-phrases or that a particular sub-clause was simply a verbal filler. One consequence is that some sentences are allocated to more than one mode using Aian’s (2017) typography and practically his division of affect was simplified to Happiness, Security and Satisfaction with emotions then coded to indicate a positive or negative emotion (Aian, 2017).

The first speech contains 58 sentences. In turn it was broken down into four major subsections where he thanks the assembly and his predecessor (Opening Remarks), he then discusses his own appointment (Appointment) sets out his goals for the UN (Future Goals) and his own plans (Plans). Each of these sections is 13-16 sentences long. The second speech is shorter (40 sentences) and again is broken into subsections of a short introduction, an Acknowledgement of the help he has been given, a review of his personal goals, the process of leaving and a final expression of gratitude.

For speech, the use of emotions connected with Affect varies substantially across the four sections, as:

Table 4: Speech One: Affect

		Opening Remarks	Appointment	Future goals	Plans	Total
Happiness	N			7	1	8
Happiness	P	3	2		1	6
Security	N	2	6	1	9	
Security	P	1			1	
Satisfaction	N			3	2	5
Satisfaction	P	1	4		1	6

In these opening remarks, this is used in a limited manner and mostly as positive emotions and these are mostly concentrated in a short three sentence section where he praises his predecessor such as “You have led the Organization through challenging times, and ushered it firmly into the twenty-first century”. However, when he is discussing his appointment, there is a shift to a much more critical form and use of negative emotions to indicate the challenges he perceives such as “This path is narrow and steep, and transcends national borders and partisan interests”. This critique flows into his goals for the organisation going forward, again using negative emotion to identify the depth of the problem “The dark night of distrust and disrespect has lasted far too long” and this theme carries into the final section of his plans going forward “As we pursue our collective endeavour to reach that goal, my first priority will be to restore trust”.

In terms of judgement the speech has a reverse pattern.

Table 5: Speech One - Judgement

			Opening Remarks	Appointment	Future goals	Plans	Total
Social Esteem	Normality	N					
Social Esteem	Normality	P	1			1	
Social Esteem	Capacity	N					
Social Esteem	Capacity	P	3	1	1	1	6
Social Esteem	Tenacity	N					
Social Esteem	Tenacity	P	2		2		4
Social Sanction	Veracity	N					
Social Sanction	Veracity	P	1				1
Social Sanction	Propriety	N					
Social Sanction	Propriety	P	10			2	12

These are concentrated at the beginning where he is praising his predecessor, in effect he used the sort of language to be expected when delivering such a speech. Phrases such as “It is an honour to follow in your revered footsteps” are expected as part of such a formal event.

Even more than Judgement his use of Appreciation was heavily concentrated in his opening remarks.

Table 6: Speech One - Appreciation

			Opening Remarks	Appointmen t	Future goals	Plans	Total
Reaction	Impact	N					
Reaction	Impact	P	1				1
Reaction	Quality	N					
Reaction	Quality	P				3	3
Composition	Balance	N					
Composition	Balance	P	1				1
Composition	Complexity	N			2	5	7
Composition	Complexity	P	4				4
	Valuation	N					
	Valuation	P	6				6

One thing that does stand out is the shift in relative complexity. The opening remarks are full of short, single phrase, sentences but the language become much more complex (and thus opaque) as he moves into his plans for the future. So, while a sentence such as “I will do everything in my power to ensure that our United Nations can live up to its name, and be truly united; so that we can live up to the hopes that so many people around the world place in this institution, which is unique in the annals of human

history” is perhaps to be expected, it is complex and actually rather convoluted as to what is meant.

The second speech has a very different pattern. Issues related to affect, and of positive emotions dominate the speech and are common in each sub-section.

Table 7: Speech Two - Affect

			Acknowl				
		Introduction	edgemen	Goals	leaving	Gratitude	Total
Happiness	N		4		4		8
Happiness	P	1	7	2	1	3	14
Security	N				2		2
Security	P		2	6			8
Satisfaction	N				1		1
Satisfaction	P		1	1	5	4	11

Positive framings of happiness are common across the speech, especially where he is noting support from others such as “You should be very proud — just as I am so very proud to call you my colleagues” and negative framings of regret are very much about his personal emotions “Now I feel a bit like Cinderella”.

On the other hand, Judgement is rarely invoked except that of normalcy at the stages where one would expect certain sentiments to be set out

Table 8: Speech Two - Judgement

			Introduction	Acknowl	Goals	leaving	Gratitude	Total
			edgemen					
Social Esteem	Normality	N				1		1
Social Esteem	Normality	P	2	1			5	8
Social Esteem	Capacity	N						
Social Esteem	Capacity	P						
Social Esteem	Tenacity	N						
Social Esteem	Tenacity	P	1					1
Social Sanction	Veracity	N						
Social Sanction	Veracity	P			2	2		4
Social Sanction	Propriety	N						
Social Sanction	Propriety	P						

Similarly appreciation is limited except in one regard.

Table 9: Speech Two - Appreciation

			Introduction	Acknowledgements	Goals	leaving	Gratitude	Total
Reaction	Impact	N				1	2	3
Reaction	Impact	P						
Reaction	Quality	N						
Reaction	Quality	P						
Composition	Balance	N	1	1	5	6		13
Composition	Balance	P						
Composition	Complexity	N						
Composition	Complexity	P						
	Valuation	N						
	Valuation	P						

Here complex long sentences become very common or obscure concepts are used such as “Tomorrow night, on the eve of the new year, I will be in Times Square for the ball drop — millions of people will be watching as I lose my job”. This may be clear to some readers, and presumably those hearing the speech, but it is not universal. Equally a sentence such as “First, to set priorities and stay focused — on advancing sustainable development, on climate change, on empowering women and youth and many other issues” is almost meaningless. The four named issues are themselves a massive agenda never mind the ‘many other issues’. In turn this leaves the intent of the sentence unclear.

Discussion

The two speeches bookend his tenure at the United Nations and, perhaps as to be expected, have areas of similarity (especially the social politeness expected) but also important differences. Key among the latter is the relatively substantial, negative, critique of the problems he is inheriting compared to his own evaluation of his tenure.

Despite both having substantial elements of what could be seen as social politeness these actually see different emotions invoked. In the first speech this phase is found primarily in his opening remarks and in the second, more commonly, spread across his introductory remarks, acknowledgement of those he has worked with and gratitude for having the chance to carry out the role. In the first speech he has 36 emotions in the introduction (7 are Affect, 17 Judgement and 12 Appreciation) and these are overwhelmingly positive (34 out of 36). The second speech also has 36 such instances (22 Affect, 11 Judgement and 3 Appreciation). Again, this section is noted for its positive tone (34 out of 36). What is immediately clear is the importance of Affect in the second speech even in the sections that can be

seen as fitting social norms. Typical in the second speech as short statements of emotion (“I have just two words: Thank you”) with a high degree of repetition (“And I thank you”). This suggests that even when the goal is similar, to deliver the forms of social politeness expected of such a speech, the semiotic resources differ. The first speech makes relatively limited use of emotions while the second relies on them heavily. One possible reason is the first involved more of what might be expected, such as thanking a predecessor while the second was much more personal, expressing more personal thanks to people he has worked with.

One area of contrast is in the first speech he sets out his plans to deal with what he described as the problems facing the UN and in the second, he evaluates his 10 years in charge. In the first speech he uses 27 emotions (15 affect, 4 judgement and 8 appreciation). These are often negative (12/15 affect) in particular in terms of evoking insecurity. Equally the sentences become complex and unclear (5 instances of this). His review in the second speech uses 15 emotions (139 affect, 0 judgement and 6 appreciation). The balance now is positive in terms of affect but not for appreciation (all are negative). This suggests an attempt to present a record of success but having to use very specific (and somewhat contrived) phrasing to achieve this (“Second, to never give up, to keep dreaming, to keep believing, and to keep working hard until we achieve progress”). However, a largely negative review is presented with substantial invoking of negative emotions compared to the positive emotions in his self-evaluation.

As such this fits the expected pattern of emotions, suggesting that a basically negative appraisal of a situation will inevitably draw on negative emotions. However, the difference in how he handles the social norms of thanking suggests there is not always such a close match of emotions invoked and overall effect. In consequence, overall impact and the specific emotions used can vary and wider circumstances matter as well as the direct impact. In the first speech much of the praise is relatively formalised as part of a set piece speech on taking up the role. In the second it is often more personal, and repetitive (the regular use of ‘thank you’) so invokes a different emotional range.

Conclusion

Appraisal Theory is useful for exploring the emotional element of a political or formal speech. However, if the focus is essentially on the incidence of emotions, then it can be misleading. As here a negative appraisal uses mostly negative emotions and a positive one is based on purely positive emotions. In that sense, the relationship is as expected, but the two instances of meeting social norms actually see quite different emotions involved. Both score highly in terms of politeness and expected

elements (“Secretary-General Annan, I am all the more humbled because it is you I am succeeding in what you have described as “the world's most exalting job” and from the second speech “I’m honoured to be here with you, the President of the General Assembly, the President of the Security Council and, most importantly, I’m extremely, extremely honoured and happy to meet you”) but overall work in a very different tone.

This suggests that too much emphasis can be placed on incidence of emotions rather than the precise wording used to carry that emotion. This may reflect some of the ambiguities in Appraisal Theory (Bolouri, 2008; Hofmann, et al., 2020; Shahmir, et al., 2023) but it also indicates that the wider meaning of a speech cannot be captured at a sentence by sentence (or phrase by phrase) level. Thus, quantitative approaches are useful but there is a clear need to continue to use essentially qualitative approaches to studying the emotional role of formal speeches.

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