

## 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 focuses on the study of two speeches by Ban Ki Moon. The first in 2006 was his acceptance speech and the second, in 2016, was his speech on leaving his role as Secretary General of the United Nations. By employing the same speaker and organization, this helps remove variances due to personal or corporate style. It also allows a focus on how different semiotic approaches are used at different stages of each speech. 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. This also suggests a linkage between chosen mode and purpose. However, meaning-making cannot just be understood through a sentence by sentence analysis and there still remains a need to take a holistic overview and place the speech in a wider context.

**Keywords:** Affect, Judgement, Speech, Attitude, Appreciation, Appraisal theory

### Introduction

Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) focuses on the emotional content of speech and text (and images where appropriate) in building up both the intended meaning 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 the following 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. The advantage of choosing speeches by the same person in the same organization is that this removes any variation that may have reflected individual speaking styles or differences in corporate norms.

One practical issue is that while appraisal theory offers a framework, there are challenges in its practical application (Troiano, Oberländer & Klinger, 2023; Wei, Wherrity & Zhang, 2015). This does not just include practical issues of coding, but also the basic terminology in use (Aian, 2017; Mirzaaghabeyk, 2022). Despite this, the analysis points to how different emotions are invoked, or reflected, across the different sections of a speech (Roseman & Smith, 2001). Furthermore, in both cases, the speaker seeks to fit in with the social norms of courtesy and politeness that are believed to characterize the institution (Aian, 2017; Hofmann, Troiano, Sassenberg & Klinger, 2020). This gives a pattern of emotions different from those 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) focuses 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 is known as interpersonal semantics. In many contexts, the goal of a text (or a speech) is to generate an emotional response. There may be elements of information giving, meeting social sensibilities and expectations, but the end goal is often emotional. Hence, the speaker may use modes of speech designed to make them appear likeable or authoritative to make their proposal appear more attractive. Thus, the language chosen and wider speech structure is important to maintain interpersonal relationships (Hamby & Jones, 2022), and to gain the benefits of being seen 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 terms of the understanding that relates to prior knowledge and attitudes as well as to what is expected. Furthermore, 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 because they are socially expected, and, if absent, it could 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 in both speech and the likely audience important (Zhou, 2023). Moreover, it is important to note how contrived formal speeches often are, as they are designed with a purpose (Bolouri, 2008) and, for an important figure, they are 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 also use affect, judgement, and appreciation for this process (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 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).

Judgement is the process of evaluation, originally of the 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). However, 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 emphasize their status as an outsider challenging the system (Ross & Caldwell, 2020; Zhou, 2023). This leads to ambiguity as to which process is being followed, an issue common across the use of appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005; Page, 2003). The only practical solution is to consider the totality of the speech and the known aims of the speaker (Alhuthali, 2018).

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 enlighten 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 it can be situational, responding to this particular instance. Overall, appreciation may either pre-condition the likely response or provide information missing from the actual image to come to an understanding.

Taken together, appraisal theory is “concerned with evaluation of 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. Also, some degree of quantitative investigation was 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, as textual units (documents, paragraphs, sentences, words) are mapped to a pre-defined 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 may 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. The consequence may be over-emphasis on that part of a speech that sets out policy at the expense of how the speaker uses elements of speech in more social phases, such as thanking their audience for attending. In this study, the decision was made to analyze the complete speech by sentence.

Very few sentences 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 shown in the table below:

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

The Affect System				
	Affect	Surge(of behavior)	Disposition	P/N
Happiness	Cheer	laugh, rejoice, smile	Cheerful, buoyant	Positive
	Affection	hug, embrace	love, adore, like	
Unhappiness	Misery	cry, wail, whimper	down, sad	Negative
	Antipathy	abuse, curse, revile	hate, resent, abhor	
Security	Confidence	proclaim, declare	assured, confident	Positive
	Trust	entrust, believe	reliable, trusting	
Insecurity	Disquiet	shaking, restless	uneasy, anxious	Negative
	Surprise	start, faint, collapse	startled, shocked	
Satisfaction	Interest	attentive, industrious	absorbed, focused	Positive
	Pleasure	reward, praise	content, pleased	
Dissatisfaction	Ennu	yawn, fidget	jaded, stale, bored	Negative
	Displeasure	scold, blame, caution	angry, furious	

As the second subset of attitude, judgment deals with attitudes towards behaviour and has a positive and negative dimension corresponding to positive and negative judgment on behaviour. Under judgment, human behaviours 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	odd, obscure, peculiar
	Capacity	fit, mature, clever, expert	weak, sick, stupid
	Tenacity	brave, careful, reliable, loyal	timid, hasty, stubborn
Social Sanction	Veracity	honest, credible, frank	blunt, deceitful
	Propriety	caring, modest, generous	cruel, rude, selfish

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—can be grouped into three sub-types: reaction, composition, and value.

**Table 3.** Appreciation System (Aian, 2017)  
**The Appreciation System**

Appreciation		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 because emotions, such as fear, can be a useful spur to action, while 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 was his speech 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 a eventuality 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. Thereafter, it was 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 sub-sections: thanking the assembly and his predecessor (Opening Remarks), discussing his own appointment (Appointment), setting out his goals for the UN (Future Goals), and detailing 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 sub-sections 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 shown in the table below:

**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, affect 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 discusses his own appointment, there is a shift to a more critical tone 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 organization 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”. In addition, 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, the use of appreciation was heavily concentrated in his opening remarks.

**Table 6.** Speech One – Appreciation

			Opening Remarks	Appointment	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, and sentences, but the language become 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 subsection.

**Table 7.** Speech Two – Affect

			Acknowl 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”. Also, 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 edgemen	Goals	leaving	Gratitude	Total
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	Acknowledgement	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 who hear the speech, but it is not something that will be universally understood. 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 expected, have areas of similarities (especially the social politeness expected). In addition, it also has important differences. A key among the latter is the relatively substantial, negative, and 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, it 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 in such instances (22 affect, 11 judgement, and 3 appreciation). Again, this section is noted for its positive tone (34 out of 36). Thus, what is very clear is the importance of affect

in the second speech, even in the sections that can be seen as fitting social norms. The second speech has 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 that 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. Here, 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 he has been 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 19 emotions (13 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 a result, this fits into 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 its overall effect. In consequence, the overall impact and the specific emotions used can vary and wider circumstances matter as well as the direct impact. In the first speech, more of the praise is relatively formalized as part of a set piece speech on taking up the role. In the second speech, it is often more personal and repetitive (the regular use of ‘thank you’) to invoke 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. Furthermore, 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. Also, 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 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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