

An Attitudinal Analysis of Emma Watson's United Nations Speech from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

Zuo Yayu

School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, 710128, China

Keywords: Appraisal theory; attitudinal analysis; United Nations speech; discourse analysis; Emma Watson

Abstract: United Nations speeches are a form of institutional public discourse that requires speakers to negotiate stance and values with a global audience. Based on Appraisal Theory, this study conducts an attitudinal analysis of Emma Watson's speech delivered at the United Nations, aiming to examine how evaluative meanings are constructed and function discursively. Using the full text of the speech as data, a combined quantitative and qualitative approach is adopted to identify and classify attitudinal resources into affect, judgment, and appreciation. The results indicate that appreciation resources are most frequently used, mainly to evaluate abstract social values and ideological concepts related to gender equality. Judgment resources serve to construct moral responsibility and ethical positioning, while affect resources, though less frequent, contribute to emotional engagement and audience identification. The study shows that the strategic use of attitudinal resources enables the speaker to balance emotional appeal, moral legitimacy, and value alignment in an international institutional context, demonstrating the applicability of Appraisal Theory to speech discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

Public speeches delivered in international political arenas constitute a crucial site for the construction and dissemination of social values. Among such arenas, the United Nations occupies a unique position due to its global authority, diverse audience, and strong moral legitimacy. Speeches delivered at the United Nations are therefore not only informative but also highly evaluative, as speakers are required to articulate positions, express attitudes, and persuade audiences from different cultural and ideological backgrounds.

In recent years, feminist discourse has become increasingly prominent in international public communication. Issues such as gender equality, women's empowerment, and social justice are frequently addressed by global institutions and public figures. Emma Watson's speech delivered at the United Nations Headquarters in 2014, as part of the HeForShe campaign, represents a landmark moment in contemporary feminist discourse. As a UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, Watson addressed gender inequality from a personal yet globally resonant perspective, calling for men and women to work together toward equality. Unlike confrontational feminist rhetoric that emphasizes conflict and power struggle, Watson's speech adopts a relatively moderate and inclusive tone. This makes the speech an ideal object of linguistic analysis, as it demonstrates how evaluative language

can be strategically employed to construct persuasion without alienating audiences.

From a theoretical perspective, Appraisal Theory, developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics, offers a systematic framework for analyzing evaluative meanings in discourse. By examining how speakers deploy attitudinal resources, researchers can uncover how interpersonal meaning is constructed and how alignment with audiences is achieved.

This study aims to analyze Emma Watson's UN speech from the perspective of appraisal theory, focusing specifically on the attitude system. The following research questions guide the study: 1) What is the overall distribution of attitudinal resources in Emma Watson's UN speech? 2) How are affect, judgment, and appreciation resources realized in the speech?

2. Literature review

2.1 Studies on Appraisal Theory

Since its formulation within Systemic Functional Linguistics, Appraisal Theory has become a widely recognized framework for analyzing evaluative meaning in discourse. Appraisal Theory was originally proposed by James R. Martin and his colleagues to elaborate on the interpersonal metafunction of language, providing systematic tools to analyze how speakers encode attitudes, negotiate alignment, and construct interpersonal relationships through linguistic choices (Martin & White, 2005)^[7]. According to a recent review of appraisal studies in SSCI-indexed journals, Appraisal Theory has undergone continuous refinement and increasing recognition in international linguistic research over the past decade (Yarong Li, Weiwei Fan, 2019)^[9].

A core feature of appraisal-based research is its focus on the attitude system—including affect, judgment, and appreciation—which directly encodes speakers' emotions, moral evaluations, and value assessments. Appraisal theory has been widely adopted not only in discourse analysis but also in translation studies, sociolinguistics, and multimodal communication research (Combei & Reggi, 2023)^[2].

In China, appraisal theory has also attracted increasing scholarly attention. Researchers such as Liu Lihua (2010)^[11] have compiled comprehensive works on the appraisal system and its applications in discourse analysis, highlighting both theoretical foundations and empirical applications across genres.

Contemporary research indicates that appraisal theory is no longer interpreted merely as an extension of SFL but has developed its own methodological identity, being applied to various genres including news discourse, educational discourse, and narrative texts (Liu ,Ang, Kasim, 2022)^[5].

However, despite the growing body of research, significant gaps remain. Many Chinese studies focus on general descriptions of appraisal resources without examining their discourse functions in specific communicative contexts, especially in international or institutional genres. Moreover, although appraisal theory has been introduced in China for more than a decade, comprehensive reviews that systematically synthesize research paradigms, analytical scopes, and methodological innovations are still limited.

In contrast, international studies—while more abundant—tend to be genre-specific (e.g., political speeches, media discourse) and less often focus on evaluative patterns across multiple discourse types. This indicates that there is still considerable space for research that examines how attitudinal resources are systematically deployed in high-stakes institutional communication.

2.2 Studies on Appraisal Theory in Speech Discourse Analysis

Speech discourse has become one of the most significant genres investigated through the lens of

appraisal theory. Public speeches, especially those delivered in institutional or political contexts, inherently involve evaluation, persuasion, and interpersonal negotiation. Scholars have applied appraisal theory to explore how speakers construct interpersonal relationships and shape audience perceptions through evaluative choices.

For example, appraisal analysis has been used to examine political speeches in which speakers employ affect, judgment, and appreciation resources to build authority and establish rapport with audiences. A study analyzing two speeches by former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon found that affect and judgment resources change in function across different parts of the speech, helping to shift tone and purpose in alignment with audience expectations.

Similarly, in research on presidential speeches, scholars have shown that appreciation resources frequently evaluate abstract social ideals while judgment resources assess moral qualities of individuals or groups, thereby constructing a persuasive and cohesive discourse (Mohammed, 2024)^[8].

In Chinese academia, although appraisal theory has been introduced into speech analysis, the application remains relatively limited. Most domestic studies examine speech from a functional or genre perspective without a systematic appraisal framework, focusing instead on rhetorical strategies or thematic interpretation (Dong Baohua, Chen Chongguo, Zhao Yingji, 2021)^[10].

Meanwhile, some researchers apply appraisal theory to classroom discourse and teacher–student interaction, underlining the role of attitude resources in educational contexts (Ye Xingguo, Yu Ling, 2020)^[12].

These studies demonstrate the versatility of appraisal theory but also highlight the need for more speech-specific research that rigorously integrates attitudinal analysis with genre characteristics.

Despite the growing number of studies, appraisal research in speech discourse often emphasizes identification of resources over deeper interrogation of how these resources function dialogically within the communicative context. There remains a need for research that bridges the gap between resource identification and discourse function, particularly in institutional settings where audience diversity and ideological negotiation are more pronounced. This gap underlines the rationale for the present study, which focuses on Mari appraisal's attitude subsystem in Emma Watson's United Nations speech.

3. Theoretical and Analytical Framework

3.1 Appraisal Theory

This study adopts Appraisal Theory as its theoretical foundation. Appraisal Theory, developed by Martin and White within the tradition of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013)^[3], provides a systematic account of how evaluative meanings are constructed and negotiated in discourse. Unlike earlier models of interpersonal meaning that focused primarily on modality or speech functions, appraisal theory offers a more fine-grained framework for analyzing how speakers express attitudes, position themselves ethically and emotionally, and align with or challenge potential audiences (Martin & White, 2005)^[7].

A central premise of appraisal theory is that evaluation is not an optional or peripheral aspect of language use but a fundamental resource through which speakers enact social relations. Evaluative meanings are inherently dialogic, as they presuppose shared or contested values and anticipate audience responses. From this perspective, language users continuously position themselves in relation to social norms, moral expectations, and ideological assumptions embedded in discourse.

This dialogic and socially situated understanding of evaluation makes appraisal theory particularly suitable for the analysis of public speeches. In institutional settings such as the United Nations, speakers must communicate sensitive social issues to diverse audiences while maintaining

legitimacy and inclusiveness. Evaluation in such contexts is often realized implicitly and strategically, requiring analytical tools capable of capturing both overt and covert attitudinal meanings. Appraisal theory provides such tools by accounting for both inscribed and invoked evaluations, thereby revealing how speakers manage interpersonal meaning beyond surface-level linguistic choices.

3.2 The Attitude System in Appraisal Theory

Within appraisal theory, evaluation is organized into three interrelated subsystems: attitude, engagement, and graduation. Among these, the attitude system is concerned with types of evaluation and focuses on how speakers encode feelings, moral assessments, and value judgments. It is further divided into three categories: affect, judgment, and appreciation (Martin & White, 2005)^[7].

Affect refers to the linguistic expression of emotional responses and psychological states, such as happiness, fear, confidence, or concern. Affect can be realized explicitly through emotion words or implicitly through contextual cues that evoke emotional responses. In public speeches, affect resources often function to establish emotional resonance and to present the speaker as sincere and personally invested (Bednarek, 2009)^[1].

Judgment involves the evaluation of human behavior and character with reference to social norms, ethics, and moral expectations. Judgment resources enable speakers to construct moral positioning, attribute responsibility, and legitimize social critique. Importantly, judgment can be positive or negative and may target individuals, groups, or generalized social actors. In institutional discourse, judgment is frequently mitigated or generalized in order to avoid direct confrontation while still conveying ethical stance (Hunston, 2011)^[4].

Appreciation concerns the evaluation of things, processes, and abstract entities, such as social systems, policies, or values. Unlike judgment, appreciation does not directly target human behavior but assesses the worth, quality, or significance of phenomena. Previous studies have shown that appreciation resources are particularly prominent in speeches that aim to evaluate social ideals and ideological principles, as they allow speakers to construct authority without personal accusation (Martin, 2000)^[6].

Together, affect, judgment, and appreciation form a coherent system that enables speakers to simultaneously engage audiences emotionally, position themselves morally, and construct shared value orientations. The attitude system is therefore especially effective in analyzing persuasive discourse, where evaluation plays a central role in shaping audience alignment.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Based on the theoretical considerations above, this study focuses exclusively on the attitude subsystem of appraisal theory as its analytical framework. This choice is motivated by the research aim of examining how evaluative meanings are constructed at the levels of emotion, morality, and value in Emma Watson's United Nations speech.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, all instances of attitudinal resources in the speech are identified and classified into affect, judgment, and appreciation. Both inscribed attitudes, which are explicitly expressed, and invoked attitudes, which are implied through contextual meaning, are included in the analysis. This distinction is particularly important in institutional speech discourse, where evaluative meanings are often strategically indirect.

Second, a quantitative analysis is conducted to examine the frequency and distribution of different types of attitudinal resources. This step aims to reveal the overall evaluative tendencies of the speech and to identify dominant patterns of attitude use.

Third, selected examples from each attitudinal category are subjected to qualitative analysis. These examples are examined in relation to their linguistic realization, discourse context, and interpersonal function. Through this combined quantitative and qualitative approach, the analytical framework enables a systematic exploration of how attitudinal resources contribute to persuasion, inclusiveness, and moral positioning in institutional speech discourse.

By integrating appraisal theory with a clearly defined analytical procedure, this framework ensures both theoretical rigor and methodological transparency, thereby strengthening the validity of the present study.

4. Analysis of Attitudinal Resources in Emma Watson's United Nations Speech

The attitudinal resources in Emma Watson's 2014 United Nations speech were quantitatively analyzed, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Attitudinal Resources in Emma Watson's United Nations Speech

	Attitudinal Resources			Total
	Affect	Judgment	Appreciation	
Frequency	32	41	55	128
Percentage (%)	25.00	32.03	42.97	100

As shown in Table 1, a total of 128 instances of attitudinal resources are identified in Emma Watson's United Nations speech. Among the three subcategories, appreciation resources occur most frequently, accounting for 42.97% of the total, followed by judgment resources (32.03%) and affect resources (25.00%).

The predominance of appreciation resources indicates that the speaker places particular emphasis on evaluating social phenomena, abstract values, and ideological concepts related to gender equality. Judgment resources are mainly used to assess human behavior and moral responsibility, while affect resources, though less frequent, play a crucial role in establishing emotional engagement with the audience. Overall, the distribution pattern reflects the persuasive and inclusive nature of the speech.

4.1 Analysis of Affect Resources

Affect resources are used to express or evoke emotional responses and play a crucial role in establishing interpersonal closeness between the speaker and the audience. In Emma Watson's speech, affect is not excessively foregrounded; instead, it is carefully controlled and often realized implicitly. This restrained use of affect is consistent with the institutional context of the United Nations, where overt emotionality may undermine credibility.

Example 1: I am reaching out to you because I need your help.

The phrase "I need your help" constitutes an instance of inscribed affect, explicitly expressing a feeling of dependence. Rather than positioning herself as a powerful advocate speaking on behalf of others, the speaker adopts a vulnerable stance. This emotional positioning reduces hierarchical distance between the speaker and the audience, inviting cooperation rather than passive listening. Affect here functions to construct solidarity and shared responsibility.

Example 2: I have seen my father's role as a parent being valued less by society.

This sentence evokes a sense of concern and dissatisfaction without explicitly naming an emotion. The negative emotional response is invoked rather than inscribed, as it is embedded in a personal narrative. By grounding affective meaning in lived experience, the speaker enhances the authenticity of the discourse. This strategy encourages empathy while maintaining a measured emotional tone appropriate to an institutional setting.

Example 3: I started questioning gender-based assumptions a long time ago.

The phrase “started questioning” invokes a cognitive-emotional process that signals unease and reflection. Although no explicit emotion word is used, the clause implies a sense of discomfort with social norms. This invoked affect presents emotional awakening as a rational and reflective process, aligning emotion with intellectual engagement rather than impulsive reaction.

Example 4: If not now, when?

This rhetorical question evokes urgency and emotional pressure. The affective meaning is realized through clause structure rather than lexical items, making it a clear case of invoked affect. By appealing to the audience’s sense of immediacy, the speaker transforms emotional concern into motivation for action. Affect here functions as a catalyst rather than an end in itself.

Overall, affect resources in the speech are strategically sparse and contextually grounded. They contribute to emotional identification while preserving the authority and seriousness expected in United Nations discourse.

4.2 Analysis of Judgment Resources

Judgment resources evaluate human behavior and character in relation to social norms and moral expectations. In Emma Watson’s speech, judgment resources are central to framing gender equality as a moral issue rather than a personal or political preference.

Example 5: Men don’t have the benefits of equality either.

This clause implicitly evaluates social practices that disadvantage men, constituting negative judgment of social behavior. By emphasizing shared harm, the speaker avoids accusatory judgment of specific groups. This strategy broadens the moral scope of the issue and encourages male audience members to identify with the cause.

Example 6: We don’t often talk about men being imprisoned by gender stereotypes.

The metaphor “being imprisoned” strongly judges societal norms that restrict individual freedom. This is a case of invoked negative judgment, as the evaluation is embedded in metaphorical language. The metaphor intensifies moral condemnation while maintaining indirectness, which is effective in an institutional context.

Example 7: It is right that women be involved on my behalf in the policies that affect my life.

The expression “it is right” represents explicit positive judgment, appealing to shared ethical principles such as fairness and justice. This moral evaluation positions gender equality as ethically self-evident, leaving little room for opposition without appearing morally unreasonable.

Example 8: Gender equality is your issue too.

Although concise, this statement carries a strong judgmental force. It evaluates indifference as morally insufficient and repositions the audience as ethically accountable participants. Judgment here functions dialogically, challenging passive stances while avoiding direct confrontation.

Judgment resources in the speech thus establish a moral framework in which gender equality is constructed as a collective ethical responsibility. They enable the speaker to assert authority while maintaining inclusiveness.

4.3 Analysis of Appreciation Resources

Appreciation resources are the most frequent attitudinal category in the speech, reflecting the speaker’s emphasis on evaluating abstract concepts, social systems, and ideological values. This preference aligns with the institutional nature of the discourse, where evaluating phenomena rather than individuals is often more persuasive.

Example 9: This is not about feminism.

This negated construction functions as an evaluative redefinition of feminism. By rejecting narrow or stereotypical interpretations, the speaker implicitly evaluates them as inadequate. This

instance of appreciation reshapes the ideological framing of the discourse, making it more accessible to a global audience.

Example 10: Equality is not a zero-sum game.

This metaphor constitutes positive appreciation, evaluating equality as mutually beneficial. The metaphor simplifies a complex ideological argument and assigns positive value to cooperation rather than competition. Appreciation here supports persuasion by presenting equality as rational and advantageous.

Example 11: We want to end gender inequality.

The phrase “gender inequality” is evaluated as an undesirable social condition. This negative appreciation targets a social phenomenon rather than individuals, allowing the speaker to criticize injustice without assigning blame. Such evaluation is particularly effective in institutional discourse.

Example 12: Empowering women benefits everyone.

This clause evaluates empowerment as socially valuable and universally beneficial. It represents positive appreciation of a social process, reinforcing the speech’s inclusive ideological stance.

Example 13: Equality makes us stronger.

Here, equality is evaluated as a source of collective strength. Appreciation functions to align moral values with pragmatic benefits, strengthening the persuasive force of the discourse.

Through extensive use of appreciation resources, the speaker constructs a coherent ideological framework in which gender equality is presented as valuable, rational, and universally beneficial.

In sum, the analysis demonstrates that Emma Watson strategically deploys attitudinal resources to achieve multiple interpersonal goals. Affect resources foster emotional identification without excessive emotionality; judgment resources construct moral responsibility while maintaining inclusiveness; appreciation resources evaluate social values and ideological concepts in ways that enhance legitimacy and persuasion. Together, these attitudinal resources form an integrated evaluative strategy that supports the persuasive aims of the speech within the institutional context of the United Nations.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the use of attitudinal resources in Emma Watson’s United Nations speech from the perspective of Appraisal Theory, with a particular focus on the attitude system. By combining quantitative distributional analysis with qualitative discourse analysis, the study has explored how affect, judgment, and appreciation resources are deployed to construct evaluative meaning in an institutional speech context.

The findings indicate that appreciation resources are the most frequently used attitudinal category, suggesting that the speaker prioritizes the evaluation of abstract social values and ideological concepts related to gender equality. Judgment resources play a crucial role in constructing moral responsibility and ethical positioning, framing gender equality as a shared social obligation rather than a confrontational issue. Affect resources, although less prominent, contribute to emotional engagement and audience identification, enhancing the persuasiveness of the speech without undermining its institutional tone. Together, these attitudinal resources form an integrated evaluative strategy that balances emotional appeal, moral legitimacy, and value alignment in addressing a global audience.

It should be noted that this study is limited to the analysis of a single speech and focuses exclusively on the attitude subsystem of appraisal theory. Future research may extend the scope by examining a larger corpus of United Nations speeches, incorporating additional appraisal subsystems, or adopting a multimodal perspective to further explore evaluative meaning in institutional discourse.

References

- [1] Bednarek, M. (2009). *Emotion talk across corpora*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [2] Combe, C. R., & Reggi, V. (2023). *Appraisal, Sentiment and Emotion Analysis in Political Discourse: A Multimodal, Multi-method Approach*. Routledge.
- [3] Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. (2013). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar*. Routledge.
- [4] Hunston, S. (2011). *Corpus approaches to evaluation: Phraseology and evaluative language*. Routledge.
- [5] Liu, Q. Y., Ang, L. H., & Kasim, Z. M. (2022). *Appraisal Theory in Translation Studies--A Systematic Literature Review*. Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 30(4).
- [6] Martin, J. R. (2000). Beyond exchange: Appraisal systems in English. *Evaluation in text*, 142-175.
- [7] Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [8] Mohammed, A. (2024). *Appraisal Theory and Interpreting Political Speech*. European Scientific Journal (ESJ), 20(20), 46-59.
- [9] Yarong Li, Weiwei Fan. (2019). *Appraisal Theory Studies on SSCI Publications from 2009-2018*. *Modern Linguistics*, 7(2), 200–206.
- [10] Dong, B. H., Chen, C. G., & Zhao, Y. J. (2021). International research hotspots and developmental trajectories of functional discourse analysis (2010–2019). *Foreign Languages and Literature*, 37(4), 74–84.
- [11] Liu, L. H. (2010). *Studies in appraisal theory*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [12] Ye, X. G., & Yu, L. (2020). An analysis of attitudinal lexis in classroom discourse from the perspective of James R. Martin's Appraisal Theory. *Language and Culture Forum, Second Series*.