



# A Comparative Study on Attitude Resources of University Presidents' Graduation Speeches in China and America

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**Abstract.** Based on appraisal theory, this paper analyzes the distribution of attitude resources in the graduation speeches of Chinese and American university presidents in terms of three subsystems of attitude resources: affect, judgement and appreciation, respectively. With the help of UAM corpus tool, the author compares the similarities and differences between Chinese and American discourse in this regard. The study found that both Chinese and American university presidents' graduation speeches have the largest proportion of judgment resources; the differences lie in the fact that Chinese university presidents' graduation speeches are mostly appreciative resources, while American university presidents' graduation speeches are mostly affect resources. This study has certain reference value for broadening the research perspective of speech discourse, and it also has guiding significance for the mutual learning of Chinese and American cultures.

**Keywords:** Appraisal theory · Graduation speeches · Attitude resources · Affect · Judgement · Appreciation

## 1 Introduction

When Martin and White et al. created the Appraisal System based on the “Writing Well” research project in New South Wales, the interest in this theory has continued to grow, making it one of the highlights and hotspots in the development of systemic functional linguistics in the nearly 20 years (Chen, 2007) [1]. In recent years, appraisal theory has been widely applied in discourse analysis, but few studies have analyzed university presidents' graduation speeches from the perspective of appraisal theory. The president's graduation speech, as the last systematic address to students before they leave school, plays an important role in the cultural life of the whole campus, and it also indicates the end of a learning journey. On the occasion of graduation, the graduation speech of the president of the university has great motivational significance for students, and it also reflects the profound culture of the university, so it is said that the discourse of this category is very meaningful.

Because few people have analyzed the attitude resources of university presidents' graduation speeches, this paper takes this kind of discourse as the corpus, and uses

the sub-theory of appraisal theory, “attitude system” as a framework to explore the distribution characteristics of the attitude resources of graduation speeches of presidents in China and America and the similarities and differences in the means of realization. In this study, the author selected the graduation speeches of well-known Chinese and American university presidents in the past five years as the corpus, analyzed the attitude resources in them, explored the proportion of each subsystem in depth, and then revealed the significance of this type of discourse in university education.

The significance of this study is that university graduation speeches have strong educational significance due to their purpose and the specificity of the audience and have high appreciation and research value. Applying appraisal theory to university graduation speech discourse provides a method for comparing discourse in different languages; the comparison can promote the learning of Chinese and American university culture and has implications for university construction.

## 2 Literature Review

With the development of appraisal theory, the scope of its application has become wide, and the research on the application of appraisal theory is divided into three major categories: translation, English language teaching and discourse analysis.

Translation studies focus on the comparative study of different translations and the insights of appraisal theory on translation. Chen Mei and Wen Jun (2013) analyzed the distribution of resources contained in the attitude system of Bai Juyi’s poetry and demonstrated that the use of appraisal strategies is closely related to the readability of translated poems [2]. Huo Yuehong and Wang Lu (2016) analyzed a comparative study of the attitude resources of two English translations of the work *The Peony Pavilion*, aiming to seek which one can better reflect the interpersonal meaning [3]. Si Xianzhu and Pang Yuhou (2018) studied the applicability of appraisal theory in translation research and summarized important insights for it [4]. Si Bingyue and Gao Song (2019) analyzed the graduation resources of the 2019 bilingual version of the government work report and its value [5].

The number of studies applying appraisal theory to English language teaching practice or learning practice is relatively small compared to the other categories, it is mainly to study the inspiration of appraisal resources on various aspects of English listening, speaking, reading and writing. Liao Chuanfeng (2008) proposed a new approach to the theme of discourse in foreign language teaching [6]. Ma Weilin (2007) investigated the significance and implications of appraisal theory for teaching spoken English [7]. McKinley (2018) explored how the taxonomy of appraisal meanings provided by Martin and White’s (2008) appraisal framework can be linguistically implemented in the possibility analysis of inspired self-identity proposed by Clark and Ivanić (1997), where the authors investigated 16 writers at a Japanese university over the course of a year to learn to write English composition, providing English writing teachers and students with an explicit meta-language to construct the social structure of the writer’s self [8]. Fang Ying (2021) looked at the spatial expansion of conversational discourse in the oral test of TEM4 in terms of the engagement system and concluded that teachers should purposefully popularize the language engagement system to students in the process of teaching English to broaden their discourse space [9].

Discourse analysis includes different kinds of text type. News discourse has always been a hot topic in the field of linguistic research. The application of appraisal theory to analyze news discourse mainly includes comparative studies to analyze the focus and differences between different national news media in expressing interpersonal functions. The study of speech discourse mainly includes political speeches, school opening or graduation speeches, and celebrity speeches. Among them, because of its own propaganda characteristics, the political speech discourse conquers the masses with its distinct and firm political stance and full and eloquent reasoning, so it has the most relevant studies.

The above studies have all analyzed the use of appraisal theory from different perspectives, so this paper chooses the relatively new corpus that few researchers studied and analyzes the distribution of attitude resources of graduation speech discourse.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Appraisal Theory

Appraisal theory is a development of the theoretical assumptions of the interpersonal function of systemic functional linguistics, which is a theory of the “person” in the interpersonal function and focuses on the appraisal resources in discourse (Liu, 2010) [10]. It expands the study of interpersonal system from the sentence level to the discourse level, from the grammatical level to the semantic level, from the focus on exchange interaction to the focus on position interaction, and deepens the study of interpersonal context (Li, 2004) [11]. The appraisal system is one of the three systems that express interpersonal meaning at the discourse semantics level, the other two systems being the negotiation system and the involvement system. The appraisal system contains three subsystems, namely engagement, attitude, and graduation, while this paper studies the attitude resources of the discourse.

#### 3.2 Attitude Resources

Attitude is a way of expressing emotions, which contains affect, judgement and appreciation. The affect system is the center of the entire attitude system, from which the judgement and appreciation systems are derived. Affect belongs to the category of reaction in psychology, which is the response to behaviors, texts and phenomena. Affect resources involve positive or negative aspects, such as happy/painful, confident/worried, interested/bored. Martin and White (2008:49–51) classify affect resources into three categories, happiness/unhappiness, satisfaction/dissatisfaction, security/insecurity [12].

Judgment belongs to the category of ethics, which is the appraisal of the behavior of language users according to ethical and moral criteria. Broadly speaking, it can be divided into social esteem and social sanction. Social sanction has to do with normality, competence, and tenacity. Social sanction has to do with veracity and propriety. Judgments relate to people’s attitudes toward behavior, such as commend/criticism, praise/condemnation.

Appreciation system belongs to the category of aesthetics and refers to the appraisal of texts and phenomena; appreciation is the assessment of whether some phenomenon is

valuable, such as whether it is perfect and beautiful. There are equally positive and negative connotations. The system consists of reaction, composition and valuation. Halliday (1994) considers reaction as affect response, including impact and quality [13].

## 4 Research Methodology

### 4.1 Research Questions

This study makes a comparative study of attitude resources in Chinese and American graduation speeches to answer the following questions:

- What's the distribution of attitude resources of university presidents' graduation speeches in China and America?
- What are the similarities and differences of attitude resources in Chinese and American university presidents' graduation speeches?

### 4.2 Data Collection

Firstly, according to the rank of the official website, namely 2021 China University List and 2021 World University Rankings, this paper chooses the speeches are the top 5 comprehensive universities in the ranking of universities in China and the America, which are more representative, and then downloads the last 3 years graduation speeches, so two special research corpora are built. With the consideration of the length of the Chinese speeches is longer than that of American, in order to make sure the total length of the speeches is equal, the author selected 5 Chinese speeches with the length of 2000–2700 words, 7 American speeches of 1200–1800 words. Although the number of articles of the two speeches was different, the collection criteria were uniform and similar in size. At last, the capacity of the two corpora is: Chinese corpus has 12575 tokens, and American corpus has 11900 tokens.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

This paper uses the UAM Corpus Tool 3, which is a tool set for image and textual language annotation, with which to annotate attitude resources in the selected corpus. It has been widely used since its creation, especially in systemic functional grammar and discourse analysis. The process of annotation: after reading the corpus carefully several times, the researcher first clicked “Start New Project”, naming the project “Appraisal”, selected the storage location, clicked “Finalise” to create the project. Then the researcher clicked “Layers” to add a new layer, selected the theoretical framework for manually annotating the existing attitude resources inside, and annotated the texts in the corpus one by one according to Martin's proposed example assignment vocabulary for attitude resources. Finally, the frequency and percentage of statistical annotated results, and then with SPSS to do the chi-square test to compare whether the frequency difference between the two groups of data using each category was significant. “Fig. 1” showed the process of data analysis.

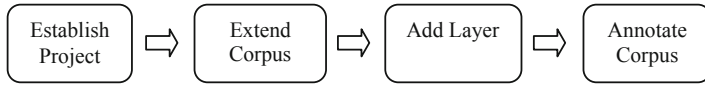


Fig. 1. Process of data analysis.

## 5 Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Distribution of Attitude Resources

In the selected speeches, the number of words in Chinese and English articles approximately reaches the same. From the statistics, the total number of attitude resources is 227 in Chinese and 314 in English. The distribution of each resource in both Chinese and English texts is generated based on the annotation results, as shown in “Table 1”.

To verify whether there was a significant difference between the two sets of data, and then to analyze the distribution of each resource, a chi-square test was done for the corpus annotation results using SPSS 25.0, as shown in “Table 2”. From the results, it can be seen that Pearson chi-square value is 7.549 which corresponds to a significant p-value of  $0.023 < 0.05$ , indicating that there is a significant difference between the two groups of data.

#### 5.1.1 Comparative Analysis of Affect Resources

Affect resources are the expression of certain emotions, positive or negative, towards people or objects. Specific examples are like, love, cry, wail; happy, excited, joyful, unexpected, etc. (Liu, 2010). From “Table 3”, it can be seen that 26.46% and 31.72% of the affect resources in the graduation speeches of university presidents in China and America respectively, therefore, more affect resources are used in the graduation speeches of university presidents in America than that in China.

- (1) First of all, on behalf of the school to **congratulate** [att: aff: + sat] you on the smooth graduation, at the same time, to the hard work of the teachers and parents, to express your **heartfelt thanks!**
- (2) I also know that many of you must have **cried** [att: aff: -hap], **laughed and shouted** [att: aff: + hap] in order to say goodbye.
- (3) That will serve as your truest guide to a life of **fulfillment** [att: aff: + sat] and **meaning and joy** [att: aff: + hap].
- (4) I **hope** [att: aff: + sec] you will remember these words: Let today serve as a beginning, and not just an ending.

The examples chosen above contain a large number of verbs and nouns, all of which are typical affect resources that show the president’s sincere feelings as well as his good wishes for the students. In example (1), the president expresses his congratulations to the students for their successful graduation and thanks to all of them; in example (2), the president expresses his feelings from the students’ point of view in a very real way; example (3) clearly points out the satisfaction and happiness that the school’s training brings to the students’ lives; example (4) uses the verb “hope” to express his earnest

**Table 1.** Distribution of Presidents' Attitude Resources in Chinese and American Universities Graduation Speeches

	Type of attitude resources			
	Affect	Judgement	Appreciation	Total
China	50 22.03%	112 49.34%	65 28.63%	227 100%
America	101 32.17%	144 45.86%	69 21.97%	314 100%

**Table 2.** Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.549 <sup>a</sup>	2	.023
Likelihood Ratio	7.647	2	.022
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.058	1	.008
N of Valid Cases	541		

**Table 3.** Type of affect resources

	Un/happiness	Dis/satisfaction	In/security	Total
China	25 50.00%	20 40.00%	5 10.00%	50 22.03%
America	50 49.51%	36 35.64%	15 14.85%	101 32.17%

expectation for the students. All the affect resources are used to bring the president closer to the students and to all the people, which make it easy to empathize and express the interpersonal meaning very well.

### 5.1.2 Comparative Analysis of Judgement Resources

The corpus was identified according to Martin and White's (2008) criteria and specific categories for distinguishing between social esteem and social sanction. Judgments in the attitude resource are judgments about the character and nature of people, which relate to whether they behave morally, conform to legal norms, are socially acceptable, are praiseworthy or lamentable, are competent and resilient, are honest and trustworthy, and are normal. Among the judgment subsystems, the three subsystems of competence, firmness of behavior, and decency of behavior appeared more frequently. Overall, valedictorians preferred to use the social judgment subsystem rather than social constraint to express their judgmental attitudes, mainly because social constraint is usually associated

**Table 4.** Type of judgment resources

	Social esteem	Social sanction	Total
China	75 66.96%	37 30.36%	112 49.34%
America	111 77.08%	33 22.92%	144 45.86%

with religious and legal punishments while social judgment is mainly judged from the perspective of social values. As can be seen from “Table 4”, the proportion of judgment resources in the president’s graduation speeches in China and America is the largest, accounting for 49.34% and 45.86% respectively, and mostly from the moral and personal perspective of the social judgment category.

- (5) Many of you present today have participated in scientific research as witnesses. You have fully demonstrated the **wisdom and responsibility [att: judg: + cap]** of the contemporary youth.
- (6) His athletic performance at the beginning of his enrollment was not ideal, but he **kept training [att: judg: + ten]** everyday, rain or shine.
- (7) One of your students, Jiang Guochen, the recipient of the Special Undergraduate Scholarship. He studied **hard** and made **remarkable** progress. He went to Stanford University for summer training with the financial support of the university and achieved **excellent results [att: judg: + cap]**.
- (8) There are choices that make you **lucky and proud [att: judg: + nor]**, for example, you chose BYU and chose to study hard to get to where you are today.

The president used a large number of positive social judgments in his speech, and affirmed the students’ abilities and achievements, Example 5 reflects her insights and abilities, and Example 6 expresses that achievement is not the end of the line, but rather the use of “capacity” resources. In examples 7 and 8, the president uses multiple adjectives to praise and acknowledge the student’s learning efforts and achievements, expressing that the student’s behavior is praiseworthy in terms of social dignity.

### 5.1.3 Comparative Analysis of Appreciation Resources

Appreciation resources are appraisals of human-made things or natural phenomena. It can be divided into three subsystems, namely, reaction which measures the affect impact on the reader/listener (reaction), composition which measures whether it conforms to various structural composition conventions and is easy to grasp (composition), and social value which measures whether it is important and meaningful (Chen, 2007). As shown in “Table 5”, appreciation resources accounted for 28.63% and 21.97% of the speeches in China and the United States, with the largest proportion of both being in the “reaction” category and the least in the “composition” category.

**Table 5.** Type of appreciation resources

	Reaction	Composition	Valuation	Total
China	30 46.15%	15 23.08%	20 30.77%	65 28.63%
America	30 43.48%	15 21.74%	24 34.78%	69 21.97%

- (9) Past campus life and teacher-student friendship will become the **best** [att: app: + rea] memory of your life.
- (10) Peking University is a **great** school, and its **greatness is not only reflected in its excellence in education and scholarship**, in its scientific spirit of pursuing truth, but also in its **relentless** [att: app: + rea] pursuit of social justice and **deep** [att: app: + val] humanistic sentiments.
- (11) And every day I've learned more about the **remarkable** [att: app: + rea] efforts of our faculty to improve the world.
- (12) Simple measures of excellence and impact – awards, honors, and good grades – these are **important** [att: app: + val], and they also can be **affirming**.

The above selected examples are typical words to express the appraisal phenomena and to emphasize the importance of education, such as best and important. The presidents' speech affirmed that the school attaches importance to the cultivation of talents and the dedication of the staff, so he gave positive appreciation.

## 5.2 Differences and Similarities in Attitude Resources

### 5.2.1 Differences in Attitude Resources

As shown in "Table 1", analysis of the data revealed that the total number of attitude resources in Chinese and American universities presidents' speeches was 227 and 314 respectively, so there was a difference in usage of attitude resources. Among the attitude resources, evaluative language is used to construct attitude orientations that lead potential listeners to empathize with the speaker in terms of moral-affect-social standards and achieve an eventual consistent stance (Yin & Li, 2016) [15]. The biggest difference is that American presidents use far more affect resources in their speeches than those in China, because they are affected by different ways of expression and characteristics.

### 5.2.2 Similarities in Attitude Resources

In the distribution of attitude resources, they both use more positive words. Among the three resources, the proportion of judgment resources is the largest. The reason for the large number of judgment resources is affected by the characteristics of graduation speeches themselves, which is to fully express the appraisal of "things" and to give a certain affirmative appreciation, expressing a high degree of recognition of people or things. Judgement resources are occupied the highest proportion, which is determined



by the characteristics of discourse, because speech text contains a lot of positive words, past actions' praise, to the student to student's certainly can enhance their confidence in entering the society, to reduce the psychological fear and panic, and in the later study work to maintain good character.

Therefore, both English and Chinese discourses use a large number of attitudinal resources, which are closely related to the discourse tenor of the chosen material (Chen, 2007). The functional tenor of the speech discourse is mainly to establish a certain connection with the audience by clarifying things or expressing feelings, in which the audience can find affect resonance and trigger an affect consensus in order to motivate and promote people's action aspect to play a positive role, thus making the connection between the two sides stronger.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper examines the distribution of attitude resources of Chinese and American university presidents' graduation speeches based on appraisal theory, and finds out the similarities and differences, draws the following conclusions.

By comparing and analyzing the attitude resources in Chinese and American university graduation speeches, this paper finds that the distribution of attitude resources on both sides has both commonality and individuality, and there are similarities and differences; the similarity lies in the fact that both use a large amount of positive discourse to construct the discourse, and both use more appreciative resources. However, there are also obvious differences: the American university graduation speech discourse uses a lot of affect resources and less judgmental resources; from its reasons, the differences in the distribution of attitude resources between China and America are mainly influenced by cultural differences, thinking styles and economic and cultural backgrounds.

**Authors' Contributions.** This paper is independently completed by Ximei Jiang.

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