**Systemic Functional Grammar: Appraisal**

Introduction

Appraisal theory is a further development of the Hallidayan framework to understand more fully the complex ways in which we express our personal views and react to the views of others. This is an area of study that is not fully captured by the existing systems within the framework (Mood-Residue, Transitivity, Theme-Rheme, and Clause-Complexing).

First things first. You’ll be relieved to know that in appraisal analysis, there is no need to first divide up the text into ranking clauses. The unit of analysis here is not the ranking clause, but the entire text. Any word, word group, or part of a word group can be single out as an example of appraisal. You will also be relieved to know that in many cases, there can be more than one possible answer. Analysis of appraisal is essentially interpretive, and the same text can be analysed very differently by different people.

Since appraisal is concerned with the expression of (and reaction to) personal views, it is part of the interpersonal metafunction of language. We are, then, exploring a resource of language that empowers us to say to our listeners “I hate functional grammar” (or physics, or biology, or golf), and so state our position on that issue. Our listeners can, of course, state their own position and add Manchester United to the list.

What are the resources in language that allow us to express such opinion about biology or Manchester United? There are three - **attitude, graduation,** and **engagement**.

Attitude

Attitude is a resource of language that enables writers to express their attitude(s) towards people, events, and other phenomena. It is expressed through words of judgement, appreciation, or emotion. Graduation (force/focus) may apply here as well, as we shall see in some examples below.

Words of **judgement** evaluate human behaviour positively or negatively according to social norms. Do note that judgement involves only human behaviour, so don’t make the mistake of including non-human entities.

My neighbour is a real nosey-parker.

[“nosey-parker” also exemplifies

negative focus; “real” is an instance

of sharp focus]

The bungling burglar lost a tooth when he missed his footing.

[“bungling” also exemplifies negative force]

He distributed the sweets fairly.

What, then, do we do with non-human entities? Ah ... we use **appreciation** instead. Words of appreciation evaluate non-living entities and phenomena according to, again, social norms:

Looking at people’s underarm hair is a disgusting habit.

[“disgusting” is itself a loaded word;

it is an example of negative force]

What about words of **emotion**? These are realised by mental processes such as “love”, “hate”, “please”, as well as nouns (eg “pain”, “anguish”, “fear”) and adjectives (eg “sad”, “happy”, “proud”) expressing various emotional states:

I admire your curly underarm hair.

[mental process]

Your admiration is simply outrageous.

[noun, adjective; “simply” is

an instance of sharp focus]

Graduation

Through graduation, the message in the text is made more intense or less intense, or sharper or blurrer. When we make the message more or less intense, we are modifying the force of the message. One the other hand, when we sharpen or blur the message, we are modifying the focus of the message. Graduation, then, involves force and focus, and it may be helpful to think of it in terms of a slider where the force/focus of a word is scaled up or down (= increased or decreased) to create a certain effect.

**Force**

Let’s start with force. Force has to do with the intensity of a word or expression. It can be raised or lowered by our choice of the following groups of words and expressions:

* words with positive/negative meanings, including metaphors:
  + That angel / rascal is my tutor.
  + This is a heavenly / rotten day.
  + The prices have short through the roof / plunged.
* repetition and synonymy, where the intensive is normally scaled up:
  + He tried and tried.
  + The durians were terrible, just awful.
* intensifiers, including subjuncts, where the intensity is either scaled up or down:
  + Alvin was a little / very disoriented.
  + They are sometimes / always late.
* Disjuncts (or modal adjuncts) where the intensity is either scaled up or down:
  + He probably / clearly went home.

The raising or lowering of force, in other words, results in a change of meaning (positive to negative, possible to definite, etc) or intensity (less intense to more intense, etc). Here’s a rule of thumb to help you along:

Force carries the idea of more-or-less (more positive, less intense, more definite, more emphasis, etc). It is usually, though not always, associated with gradable words (words that can be intensified) and words with positive or negative alternatives.

Here are further examples, this time involving negative and positive meanings:

Negative force Positive force

He is a brat. He is a highly active child.

The team was thrashed. The team put up a good fight but were no match for the highly-trained professionals.

He drove like a lunatic. He drove in a curious way.

**Focus**

What about focus, then? Well, in focus, we are concerned with class membership, and we specify how strong or weak that membership is (to our mind). Through focus, we make the meaning of X either more precise (and so strengthen its membership of that class) or less precise (and so weaken its membership). Let’s take the example of “friend”. It can be modified as follows:

James is a true friend. [sharp focus]

Gladys is a friend, kind’v. [soft focus (or blurring)]

I’m sure you can detect a difference, no? The speaker has a set of characteristics in his or her mind bout who counts as a fried. James fits the bill perfectly, but not Gladys - well, this is not necessarily all bad; she could be the speaker’s wife! As you can see, then, the use of “true” and “kind’v” serves a focussing function - they tell us who gets included in the category of “friends”. (Note that this is different from force, which serves to change the meaning or intensity in some way.

Since normal human beings have two thumbs, here is another rule of thumb to help you along:

Focus carries the idea of (im)precision and deals with class membership - how strongly or weakly an idea fits into its assigned class (“pure evil”, “about the same as a diploma”, etc). It is usually, though not always, associated with non-gradable words.

The noun “friend”, for instance, is not gradable, at least, not to my knowledge. A few other examples of focus are given below. In each case, notice that the modified word - “danger” (noun) and “means” (verb) are not normally considered gradable.

**Engagement**

Through engagement, the writer either affirms or distances himself/herself from what is written/spoken. It is dialogic in essence, where the speaker/writer “responds to something, affirms something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on” (Voloshinov 1995: 139). This can be achieved through the following ways:

**Disclaim** (I know this is uncomfortable, but let’s just treat “disclaim” as the noun) - the speaker/writer is at odds with, or does not agree fully with what someone else said or wrote. The act of disclaiming includes outright denials, counter-arguments, and concessions:

It is alleged that men are apes.

I deny that men are apes.

I concede that men are apes.

This can’t be done.

What is a “free” gift? Aren’t all gifts free?

**Proclamation** - where the speaker/writer subscribes to a particular position and, in some cases, rules out competing alternative ones. The act of proclamation includes pronouncements of personal statements and endorsements of what someone else said. [In the literature, a division is made between endorsement and concurrence. I have avoided this distinction because it is not always easy to decide which is which.] You may also notice that the examples below include comment adjuncts.

I am compelled to conclude ...

I argue / believe ...

X has shown / has demonstrated that ...

No one, or course, can kiss his/her own elbow.

Personally / To my mind / In my opinion, ...

Somewhere on this globe, every ten seconds, there is a woman giving birth to a child. She must be found and stopped. (Sam Levenson, 1911-1980).

**Entertainment** where a range of possibilities are acknowledged or entertained (hence, the label). This category includes modals and modal adjuncts of probability and usuality (eg “may”, “probably”, “likely”). The modal adjuncts can be further divided into modalisation (“how likely?”) and modulation (“how obligatory or permissible?”).

The report suggests that ...

It seems that ...

It’s possible that Alvin might just sing tonight.

**Attribution** - which reports what someone else said or wrote. By doing so, the speaker/writer acknowledges that there are alternative positions (to his or her own position). Note that attributed segments can be disclaimed, proclaimed, and even entertained.

She alleged that ...

[“alleged” is also an instance of disclaim]

They convincingly showed that research causes cancer in mice.

[“showed” reflects proclamation (endorsement)]

According to Rowan, comedians should have moles.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

The ENGAGEMENT resource of APPRAISAL (Martin & White, 2005, p 134), as cited on Wise I, 2013, ‘Appraisal - Engagement’, *Blog on linguistics*, 15 November, viewed 16/7/21, <https://blogonlinguistics.wordpress.com/2013/11/15/appraisal-engagement/>