

# An Exploratory Study of the Interpersonal Meanings of President Xi's New Year Speech Based on Appraisal Theory

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The research examines President Xi's 2021 New Year speech with research questions centering around its abundant interpersonal meanings. Through qualitative content analysis, the research finds that it is typical for Chinese president to frequently use judgment and appreciation resources in reviewing the past year. Even in the face of the pandemic and natural disasters, the overall emotions of the speech remain positive, which corresponds to the forward-looking feature of New Year speech. Significance of the study abounds and future research can investigate how COVID-19 impacts the ideologies conveyed through political leaders' speeches through a comparative lens and how to produce more understandings that can help dismantle stereotypes and discrimination hidden in reports about COVID-19 by using Appraisal Theory critically, systematically, and comprehensively.

*Keywords:* Political discourse, New Year speech, Appraisal Theory, Interpersonal meanings, COVID-19 pandemic

## Introduction

It is customary for political leaders to deliver New Year speeches filled with enthusiasm and optimism with the advent of a new year. President Xi's New Year speeches are extremely influential, viewed by tens of thousands of people, and inspiring "golden" expressions circulated around quickly after his talk. As Internet technologies develop, New Year speeches of political leaders certainly evolve as multi-modal and spread around the globe. Multiple purposes and functions are achieved with well-crafted speech, be it purposefully or naturally, including connecting with the people, building trust and winning support, influencing and lifting up people's spirits to fight for a brighter future, constructing national confidence and image as well as painting blueprints for the world to see, and so on. Therefore, it is inevitable that ideologies are constructed to strike a chord by inspiring and provoking certain emotional responses among national and international audience. In essence, interpersonal meanings are especially abundant within this genre that increasingly catches more attention. To understand interpersonal meanings better, the Appraisal Theory proposed by Martin and his colleagues is introduced and used as the analytical framework, because this theory is precisely put forward to extend and elaborate on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics' (SFL) discussion of interpersonal meta-function. SFL provides useful and powerful analytical tool and systemic perspectives and guideline for deciphering meaning-making processes and resources to achieve meaning potentials.

When it comes to the specific background, COVID-19 global pandemic posed a great challenge to the

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security, development, and prosperity of the world. It has drastically and profoundly changed the way people live, work, and think and it will continue to shape the world in unexpected yet inescapable manner. With such a major striking topic of 2020, 2021's New Year speeches by leaders are bound to reflect and comment on this latest reality, which sets this year different from past years when things, generally on surface, are stable and normal. Another specialty of Chinese New Year is that 2020 is the last year of the great plan to eradicate nationwide poverty and all other great projects in the historical times of "two 100 years crossing together"; therefore, this New Year speech by President Xi arguably holds more weight than previous ones comparatively.

Based on the theoretical framework of Appraisal Theory, the research attempts to delve into the text of President Xi's 2021 New Year speech and the research questions are:

1. How do the subsystems of Attitude System work in New Year speech?
2. What is the impact of COVID-19 and what attitudes are expressed towards it?

The current study contributes to theoretical discussion and has practical implications. From theoretical perspectives, Appraisal Theory is largely an on-going research domain and many problems are still to be addressed. For example, the definitions and boundaries between subsystems are sometimes blurred. There are numerous registers and discourse domains to which the theory has not yet been applied. Analyses of new discourses typically lead to significant extensions to and elaborations of the appraisal framework since each domain may operate differently. So, applying Appraisal Theory to the analysis of New Year speeches can extend the range of applications. Also, previous studies mainly focus on English texts, while the current study employs a Chinese text/speech as data to see if linguistic resources make a difference in conveying meanings. Practically speaking, studying political genre critically can gain a deeper understanding of political speech and help us prepare speeches. Understanding how COVID-19 greatly influences human world is also of importance. The current paper has some innovative edges, including using latest data and combing theoretical discussion with real-world events.

### **Literature Review**

Appraisal Theory as an analytic and interpretive system has been widely applied to different genres and has proved its feasibility and comprehensiveness in understanding interpersonal meanings and voices behind texts. As compared with the application of Appraisal Theory on other areas such as media, New Year speeches receive much less attention and exploration. When I consulted the CNKI website with the keywords "Appraisal Theory" and "New Year speeches by political leaders", there exist only a few relevant results (Li, 2013; Liu, 2015; Li, 2019; Liu, 2019). It is worth pointing out that all these are master theses, which shows the practicability and potentials of applying Appraisal Theory as well as room for improvement. Considering the limited length of the current paper, it is impossible to expand on and attend to all facets of Appraisal Theory. It is important to set the scope and narrow down the focus of the current paper to 2021 New Year speech by President Xi after a harsh year battling against COVID-19 where everything has changed dramatically and the Attitude System in the Appraisal Theory is wielded. Other subsystems are equally important, but exploring the Attitude System is the start.

Consistent patterns in the literature emerge. Methodologically speaking, they all combine quantitative and qualitative research methods. The major differences of these papers lie in their data set with different speeches happening in a duration of time taken out as the research objects (e.g., "2006-2015", "2016-2018", "2004-2012") and while every one of them compares Chinese and American leaders, some add in the data from other leaders,

such as the Queen's Christmas speeches ("western leaders" refer mostly to American or British leaders in their sense). It is reasonable to say that their research questions, organization, theoretical framework, and the data analysis procedure do not differ much, which provides the comparability.

All New Year speeches touch upon all three kinds of Appraisal Systems. Though with different ratios, it is found that the largest proportion of appraisal resources is attitude resources, then graduation resources and the least being engagement resources. Within each subsystem, different types of means are realized. For example, western presidents infuse their speeches with affect, while Chinese presidents rely more on judgment and appreciation resources, with less direct expression of affect, to look back on the achievements of the nation in the past year. Besides, in the judgment aspect, western presidents refer more to the social sanction category, but Chinese presidents highlight social esteem category more. To explain such findings, authors note the effects of different linguistic, cultural, religious, and historical backgrounds.

However, using a corpus that ranges from the past to the present cannot fully account for the differences found in the usage of appraisal resources. Different leaders have their own styles in speeches. Since political leaders carry, more or less, their personal traits in their speeches, to avoid over-generalization, it would be suitable to focus on one leader. Also, although the corpus is usually large and the results appear promising, each year's New Year Speech is located in specific historical and social context and thus is different. By adopting quantitative research methods, the uniqueness of that year and why certain emotional responses were aroused are masked under the duration of time and the mass of data. Therefore, the current research aims to produce more nuanced understandings of how meanings are constructed and since the global pandemic is still a living reality, rather than analyzing memories or unfamiliar events, the current paper will echo more with the present times.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Since the theory has remained relatively stable and unchanged after the revision version (Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005) from its early establishment, it would be best to use tables/figures from Martin's book to clearly illustrate the theory and its subsystems.

The definition of "appraisal" is that "Appraisal 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 aligned" (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 22). The center of Appraisal System is "System" and the focus is "Appraisal". Language is a "means" in the system. With the analysis of language, the language users' stance, opinions, and attitudes towards the issues or situations are evaluated. In other words, the evaluation also tries to find out the deep meanings behind the surface meanings. Thus, it is explanatory and has interpretative power.

The Appraisal System comprehensively consists of three subsystems—engagement, attitude, graduation—and several subcategories under each subsystem, revealing the principle of exhaustiveness in SFL. Engagement system consists of Monogloss and Heterogloss dimensions, which concerns with sources of voices by which speakers either acknowledge or ignore the diversity of view-points put at risk by their utterances and negotiate an interpersonal space for their own positions within that diversity. Graduation is an intrinsic characteristic of emotional expression and this system looks at the values by which speakers graduate (raise or lower) the interpersonal impact, force of their utterances, and by which they graduate (blur or sharpen) the focus of their semantic categorizations.

Because of the scope and focus of the current study, the emphasis is placed on the Attitude System. Attitude System itself is divided into three subsystems: affect, judgment, and appreciation. Affect refers to the

characterization of phenomena by reference to emotion. Affect is concerned with emotional response and disposition and is typically realized through mental processes of reaction and through attributive relationals of affect. Through ideational metaphor, they may, of course, be realized as nouns. Affect can be grouped as positive or negative and different types of Affect can be summarized as un/happiness, in/security, dis/satisfaction, dis/inclination.

Besides, judgment mainly concerns the evaluation of human behavior with respect to social norms, which means judgment system evaluates human behavior positively and negatively by reference to a set of institutionalized or cultural-specific norms. Two broad categories of social sanction and social esteem are found to account for more nuances and different kinds of judgment responses, as moral or immoral, as legal or illegal, as socially acceptable or unacceptable, as laudable or deplorable, as normal or abnormal, and so on. It is necessary to stress, however, that since judgment is so highly determined by cultural and ideological values, it should not be assumed the same sub-categorisations will apply in other cultural contexts, especially beyond the western, English-speaking, essentially middle-class setting of the media analysis upon which the theory is originally based.

Lastly, appreciation is about the evaluation of objects and products (rather than human behavior) by reference to aesthetic principles and other systems of social value. Appreciation typically evaluates natural objects, manufactured objects, texts as well as more abstract constructs such as plans and policies. And appreciation can be categorized into reaction, composition, and valuation.

In summary, appraisal model provides a functional model of understanding interpersonal meaning at the discourse semantics level. It is sets of meaning-making options available to the speaker/writer that can be manipulated and mapped in particular contexts to express intended meanings and stances. Appraisal involves two aspects: how speakers/writers adopt and indicate positive or negative attitudes and how they negotiate these attitudinal positions with the audience within the dialogue.

### **Data and Methodology**

The data of the current study is President Xi's New Year speech that reviews the ups and downs in 2020 and sends out wishes and anticipation for 2021 on December 31, 2020 before the New Year's Day. The whole transcribed text is taken from the official government website<sup>1</sup>.

As for the data analysis procedure, to be clear, although there are also implicit evaluation processes and means, the current paper considers only evaluative propositions that are indicated by evaluative lexicons. That is, the instances of appraisal resources recognized in this study are expressed by lexical words or phrases. In the data sheet, these resources are marked and tagged, following the Appraisal Theory system with a focus on the attitude subsystem.

Due to the length of the current paper, large-scale quantitative analysis is left out, however, general pattern can still be sensed, and qualitative analysis from the data is used to illustrate how difference appraisal resources help with the interpersonal meaning making processes.

### **Results and Discussion**

On the whole, the emotions evoked are positive concerning the positive aspects of achievements and the future. The majority of positive emotions correspond to the main aim of the speech that welcomes New Year and

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content\\_5578522.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5578522.htm)

cheer people up. However, when the President talks about the COVID-19 virus and the loss of lives due to it and destruction made by floods and other natural disasters, the emotional appreciation of the phenomena is negative. For example, “面对突如其来的新冠肺炎疫情 [attitude-appreciation-valuation, -]; 不幸感染的 [attitude-appreciation, -]; 我们还抵御了严重洪涝灾害 [attitude, appreciation, reaction, quality, -]” arouse empathy within people’s hearts and share the sorrow and burden together. In this way, the leader is seen as one of the people who mourned over the loss of lives and people who suffered from the virus, building connections and support.

Consistent with previous research, the current distribution of the appraisal resources within the Attitude System is the pattern of judgment and appreciation taking up the biggest proportion while direct expression of affect takes up least, which is characteristic of Chinese culture.

Affect examples are scarce: 我为伟大的祖国和人民 [attitude-appreciation, +] 而骄傲 [attitude, affect, satisfaction, +], 为自强不息的 [attitude-judgment-social esteem-tenacity, +] 民族精神而自豪! [attitude, affect, satisfaction, +]; 我到13个省区市考察时欣喜看到 [attitude-affect-happiness, +]. This usage of affect contains the subcategories of happiness and satisfaction and creates a strong emotional bond between the speaker and the hearer. Certain usage paints vividly an amicable leader who shares the happiness and content with the people.

The other two subsystems, judgment and appreciation, deserve more descriptions and analysis. Previous research has found that the appraisal resources used in Chinese presidents concerning judgment focus mainly on social esteem aspect. This is true in the data, especially during the times when COVID-19 spread around the world and the definitions of heroes are reconsidered.

Such evaluations or responses are inter-subjectively charged and put at risk solidarity between speaker and audience. By appraising events in affectual terms, the speaker/writer invites their audience to share that emotional response, or at least to see that response as appropriate, understandable, and well-motivated. When that invitation is accepted, then, solidarity or sympathy between speaker and listener will be enhanced. Once such an empathetic connection has been established, then there is the possibility that the listener will be more open to the broader ideological aspects of the speaker’s position. When the invitation to share the emotional response is not taken up—when the affectual value is seen as inappropriate, bizarre or dysfunctional—then solidarity or sympathy will most probably be diminished and the chance of ideological concord diminished.

One outstanding feature of judgment is that Chinese president praises the people who sacrifice and contribute to the battle against COVID-19, including ordinary people who do their bit by conforming to the regulations of the country. The second paragraph is all about the fight against the virus and since people did all kinds of behavior in the fight, the president comments on and evaluates the endeavors under the judgment subsystem. Social esteem, especially tenacity, is used as the criteria for judgment. More than once, President Xi mentions the national characters and spirits that help China and Chinese people rise up again and move forward, stronger and more determined. The usage of tenacity is representative of Chinese collectivism culture as well: 众志成城、坚忍不拔 [attitude-judgment-social esteem-tenacity, +]; 在共克时艰的日子里, 有逆行出征的豪迈, 有顽强不屈的坚守, 有患难与共的担当, 有英勇无畏的牺牲, 有守望相助的感动 [affect, attitude-judgment-social esteem-tenacity, attitude-appreciation-reaction, +]; 将涓滴之力汇聚成磅礴伟力, 构筑起守护生命的铜墙铁壁 [attitude-judgment-social esteem-tenacity, +, attitude-appreciation, +]; 乡亲们愚公移山的干劲, 广大扶贫干部倾情投入的奉献, 时常浮现在脑海 [attitude-judgment-social esteem-tenacity, +]; 我

们还要咬定青山不放松，脚踏实地加油干 [attitude-judgment-social esteem-tenacity, +]. All these sayings indicate and promote the praise of grit and persistence, arousing inspiration in people's hearts and resulting in actions. President Xi calls for people to learn these merits in face of difficulties and admire these role models. It is with these precious qualities and spirits that China can continue to strive against hardships and achieve greatness.

When it comes to appreciation, this abundant usage is also typical of Chinese culture as well, because the purpose of the New Year speech is to review past achievements and set forward future plans. Policies and projects are mentioned and evaluated under the appreciation subsystem. For example, when talked about the economy and social development, a balanced and comprehensive view is often highlighted: “十三五”圆满收官，“十四五”全面擘画 [attitude, appreciation, reaction, quality/composition, +]; “天问一号”、“嫦娥五号”、“奋斗者”号等科学探测实现重大突破。海南自由贸易港建设蓬勃展开 [attitude, appreciation, reaction, quality, +]. All of these technological breakthroughs and economic advances are appreciated and with these appreciation devices, an image of the country as full of innovative ideas and technological giants is created so as to arouse people's satisfaction and national pride. 神州大地自信自强、充满韧劲 [attitude-judgment-social esteem, +], 一派只争朝夕、生机勃勃 [attitude-appreciation-reaction-quality, +] 的景象. With this optimism evoked, people will feel more positive and confident about the future and turn enhanced energy into actions.

From these analyses, we can see the abundant uses of all these appraisal resources to show the leader's attitudes and share similar feelings with the people, narrowing down the distance and building trust and confidence forward. It is evident that COVID-19 posed a sharp challenge to China and the world, but with tenacity as the national spirit and judgment system redirecting people's opinions about who are the heroes that we should admire and learn from, the New Year speech realizes more than just welcoming the coming new year and extending best wishes to everyone. Interpersonal meanings are constructed by the careful usage of all these means to express attitudes, influence thoughts, and evoke emotional responses and actual actions.

### Conclusion

General distribution pattern appears that the largest proportion of appraisal resources are attitude resources, then graduation resources and the least being engagement resources. The appraisal resources and their subsystems combine to construe certain interpersonal meanings and help to realize certain political purposes in different contexts. The attitude appraisal resources convey interpersonal meanings through showing the speaker's emotions, judgments, and appreciation on certain objects, behavior, and phenomena. By arousing shared emotions and coordinating emotional responses, solidarity and empathy open up and pave the way for accepting implied ideologies.

COVID-19 made its way into one of the focuses of the New Year speech as negative evaluation in appreciation system, but after the processing of it in judgment system, represented by the brave men and women, including angels in white, scientists, and ordinary people, who are considered as heroes that fought selflessly for the greater good and public health of the country, the meanings are turned into something shiny and noble, stressing hope, cooperation, and unity in face of difficulties. That is when the theme of the New Year speech reaches a coherent, meaningful, and genuine whole that touches the hearts of millions of people.

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