



Attitude System in Donald Trump's Speech on Harvard's Foreign Students: An Appraisal Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the evaluative language used by Donald Trump in his speech concerning Harvard University's treatment of foreign students, employing the Attitude system from Appraisal Theory. Focusing on three subsystems such as Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation. This study analyzes how Trump constructs his political persona, positions ideological others, and frames educational policy within nationalist discourse. The data were drawn from transcribed segments of a publicly available speech and analyzed qualitatively using Appraisal Theory as the primary analytical framework. The findings reveal that Judgement was the most dominant Attitude type (44.29%), followed by Appreciation (35.71%) and Affect (20%). Most evaluations (58.57%) were directed toward others (especially institutions and political actors), while the remaining 41.43% targeted the speaker himself. The overall evaluative polarity was predominantly negative (61.43%), with positive evaluations accounting for 38.57% of the data. Trump frequently praised his own leadership capacity while expressing dissatisfaction or moral condemnation toward elite institutions. Notably, this study highlights a rarely examined theme in Trump's discourse: education policy. By framing foreign students as victims and elite universities as ideologically flawed, Trump repositions the education sector as a site of political contestation. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on political discourse by extending Appraisal analysis into the educational domain, revealing how evaluative meanings shape public narratives beyond traditional themes like war and immigration.

Keyword: Appraisal Theory, Attitude, Donald Trump, Foreign Students, Education Policy, Systemic Functional Linguistics

1. Introduction

Social media platforms like YouTube have become central to political figures' public communication (Boulianne et al., 2025; Rodrigues, 2020). Donald Trump, as a prominent political leader and media personality, has used Instagram to shape his public persona and influence public opinion. Analyzing his utterances through the lens of appraisal theory provides insights into how language is used to express attitudes, engage audiences, and amplify messages. So that YouTube has become one of the tools used for communication (Boulianne et al., 2025).

The article uses appraisal theory to examine the rhetorical function of Trump's Instagram captions, particularly those that speak to Harvard's international students. Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is the foundation of appraisal theory. From a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective, language is a resource for making meaning, and its interpersonal function goes beyond simply reflecting the world to shaping social relationships and negotiating values (Halliday, 2004). Within this framework, the appraisal system extends the theory of interpersonal meaning by exploring how speakers express attitudes, make judgments, and evaluate people, actions, and phenomena (Martin & Rose, 2007; Martin & White, 2005). The sub-system

of attitude, which this study centers on, is concerned with the expression of affect (emotions), judgment (moral evaluations of behavior), and appreciation (aesthetic evaluations of things and processes), mapping how speakers align or disalign with their audience ideologically and emotionally.

Trump's speech on Harvard's treatment of foreign students, delivered during a time of heightened political sensitivity surrounding immigration, education, and national identity, provides a compelling site for analysis. It encapsulates themes of legitimacy, entitlement, national interest, and institutional authority, all framed through evaluative language (Diana et al., 2022; Hanief & Khaidir, 2024). As Chilton (2003) argues, political discourse often involves strategic representation and misrepresentation, where political figures deploy appraisal to legitimize their own views while undermining those of others. This paper aims to examine how Trump's evaluative language reflects broader ideological stances and mobilizes attitudes to construct a particular vision of America's academic institutions and foreign policy.

Although the previous study has explored the use of appraisal in political speeches and campaign discourse (Alhudaithy, 2022; Alhuthali, 2024; Zhou, 2023), there are fewer studies that have conducted a focused appraisal analysis on Trump's rhetoric in relation to specific educational policies and international students. To the best of our knowledge, no existing study has applied appraisal theory to Trump's speech addressing Harvard's handling of foreign students. Therefore, this case study offers a detailed linguistic analysis that contributes to the understanding of how political actors encode ideological stances and negotiate national values through evaluative discourse. By focusing on the sub-system of attitude, this paper seeks to uncover how Trump constructs representations of self, others, and institutions, and how such constructions serve strategic political purposes.

This research is based on the Appraisal Theory, developed within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) primarily by Martin & White (2005). Appraisal Theory explores how speakers use language to express emotions, judgments, and valuations. Unlike traditional discourse analysis, which often focuses on structural or grammatical elements, Appraisal Theory emphasizes the interpersonal meanings in language, how speakers position themselves, evaluate others, and align or misalign with their audience. In political discourse, such as Donald Trump's speeches, language is often loaded with evaluative meanings that reveal ideological positions and influence public opinion. By applying appraisal analysis to Trump's speech on Harvard's foreign students, this study aims to unpack how evaluative language positions foreign students and constructs social attitudes (Hadidi & Parvin-L, 2015).

This focus on interpersonal meaning is grounded in Halliday's (1994) concept of language as a social semiotic system, specifically the interpersonal metafunction, which addresses how language is used to express attitudes, manage relationships, and establish speaker identity within discourse. Within this framework, Appraisal Theory categorizes evaluative language into three key systems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, each serving a distinct function in shaping meaning and stance in communication.

Among these systems, the Attitude system is particularly central, as it deals directly with how emotions, ethical judgments, and aesthetic evaluations are encoded in discourse. According to Martin & White (2005), Attitude consists of three subsystems: Affect (emotions), Judgment (moral evaluations), and Appreciation (aesthetic or institutional valuations). Each subsystem contributes to the construction of persuasive or ideological language, especially in fields like politics, where evaluative stance plays a critical role.

The application of the Attitude system in political discourse highlights how language is used strategically to reinforce ideologies, sway public opinion, and legitimize actions or policies. Affect can be used to generate emotional responses, Judgment to morally assess individuals or behaviors, and Appreciation to shape perceptions of institutions or national developments (Bednarek, 2006). For instance, in political speeches addressing topics such as immigration or foreign students, leaders might employ Judgment to portray individuals as either "law-abiding" or "threatening". This evaluative framing can be observed in speeches by figures like Donald Trump, where language choices serve not only rhetorical but also political purposes, such as justifying restrictive educational or immigration policies.

In Trump's speech, the appraised includes foreign students at Harvard, their presence, contributions, and legal or moral status, as well as broader themes such as immigration, education policy, and national security. How Trump chooses to linguistically construct these actors, whether as beneficial, threatening, loyal, or disloyal, offers insight into the ideological stances he promotes through language. By examining how Trump frames foreign students, whether as enriching institutions or as threats to national security, this analysis uncovers the strategic deployment of language to influence public opinion and solidify political identity.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a descriptive case study design to examine the attitude system in Donald Trump's speech on Harvard's foreign students through an appraisal analysis. A descriptive case study allows for an in-depth and holistic exploration of a single bounded case within its real-world context, emphasizing detailed description rather than theory development or generalization (Creswell, 2019).

The speech is treated as a specific discourse event, and qualitative discourse analysis is applied within the appraisal framework to systematically describe the attitudes expressed. The analysis focuses on what attitudes are conveyed, how they are linguistically realized, and toward whom they are directed. The study specifically examines the attitude domain of appraisal theory, including affect, judgment, and appreciation, to capture the evaluative meanings embedded in the speech. This design enables a contextualized interpretation of Donald Trump's evaluative language concerning foreign students at Harvard University.

2.2 Data Collection Technique

The primary data source of this study is the complete transcript of Donald Trump's speech obtained from a YouTube video entitled "*Trump Says Harvard Must Show List of Foreign Students (Full Q&A)*" (link: https://youtu.be/L6yjpVZTbjA?si=MGKly_dmTT_D47wz). The transcript is either carefully transcribed by the researcher or retrieved from reliable sources to ensure accuracy. To support contextual understanding, supplementary materials such as related news articles and official statements are also reviewed to provide background information on the speech and its socio-political context.

2.3 Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis is conducted using appraisal theory, with a specific focus on the attitude system, which consists of affect (emotional responses), judgment (evaluation of behavior and ethics), and appreciation (evaluation of objects, processes, and phenomena).

The transcript is analyzed through manual coding to identify instances of evaluative language. Each attitudinal expression is classified based on its type (affect, judgment, or appreciation), polarity (positive or negative), target (e.g., Harvard University, foreign students), and intensity. The analysis also considers the broader socio-political context of the speech, particularly Donald Trump's policies and public discourse concerning higher education and foreign students, to ensure an accurate and nuanced interpretation of the attitudinal meanings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

1. Attitude Employed by Donald Trump

Table 1. Attitude Employed by Donald Trump

Attitude Type	Frequency	Percentage
Affect	14	20 %
Appreciation	25	35.71%
Judgement	31	44.29%
Total	70	100%

The analysis of Trump's speech reveals a total of 70 evaluative expressions categorized under the three types of Attitude in the Appraisal framework. Among them, Judgement dominates with 31 occurrences (44.29%), indicating Trump's strong tendency to evaluate human behavior, especially related to morality, capability, and integrity. Appreciation follows closely with 25 instances (35.71%), reflecting Trump's evaluations of things, processes, and states of affairs, such as economic conditions, policies, and national status. Meanwhile, Affect, the least frequent type with 14 instances (20%), suggests that Trump less frequently expresses his personal feelings or emotional states explicitly, possibly aligning with his public persona of control and authority.

Based on this overall distribution, the researcher further examined each Attitude type in more detail by identifying its subtype, the appraised target (whether self or others), and the polarity (positive or negative) of

each evaluative instance. The following sections provide a breakdown of each Attitude category such as Affect, Appreciation, and Judgement, based on these three analytical dimensions.

a. Affect Employed by Donald Trump

Table 2. Affect Employed by Donald Trump

Affect	Frequency	Percentage
Un/happiness	4	28.57%
In/security	2	14.29%
Dis/satisfaction	8	57.14%
Dis/inclination	0	0.00%
Total	14	100%

Appraised	Frequency	Percentage
Self	4	28.57%
Other	10	71.43%

Affect polarity	Frequency	Percentage
Positive affect	1	7.14%
Negative affect	13	92.86%

Table 2 provides a more detailed account of Affect subcategories. Among the 14 expressions of Affect, the most prevalent was Dis/satisfaction, which accounted for 57.14% of the total. This suggests Trump's emotional stance was largely framed through frustration or disappointment, especially toward policies, actions, or events he disapproved of. The category of Un/happiness appeared in 28.57% of cases, typically reflecting irritation or displeasure. In/security was the least represented among the used subcategories, with only 14.29%, and there were no instances of Dis/inclination, indicating Trump rarely expressed desires or aversions explicitly. Regarding the appraised target, most Affect was directed toward others (71.43%), such as institutions, events, or political opponents, while only 28.57% were self-referential. This externalized emotional positioning reinforces Trump's strategic detachment and inclination to position himself as an observer or judge, rather than an emotionally affected actor. Furthermore, the polarity of Affect in his speech was overwhelmingly negative. Of the 14 Affect expressions, 92.86% conveyed negative emotions, and only one was positive, underscoring the overall tone of discontent and critique that characterized Trump's affective stance throughout the speech.

b. Appreciation Employed by Donald Trump

Table 3. Appreciation Employed by Donald Trump

Appreciation	Frequency	Percentage
Valuation	20	80%
Composition	1	4%
Reaction	4	16%
Total	25	100%

Appraised	Frequency	Percentage
Self	0	0%
Other	25	100%

Appreciation polarity	Frequency	Percentage
Positive appreciation	13	52%
Negative appreciation	12	48%

Table 3 explores the Appreciation system in more depth. From a total of 25 instances, Valuation was by far the most frequent subcategory, comprising 80% of the Appreciation data. This indicates Trump's tendency to assess the worth, significance, or impact of phenomena, such as national economic status, international agreements, or policy outcomes. Reaction occurred in 16% of the data and was mostly used to

convey aesthetic or emotional responses, often in exaggerated or hyperbolic terms. Composition appeared only once, representing 4% of Appreciation, and was not a central feature in Trump's rhetoric. Notably, all Appreciation targets were external; none of the expressions were self-referential. Trump directed all evaluative comments under this category toward entities like countries, policies, institutions, or events. In terms of polarity, the data showed a nearly even distribution between positive (52%) and negative (48%) Appreciation. While Trump frequently criticized events or outcomes he disagreed with, he also took strategic moments to praise policies or achievements especially those associated with his administration. This balance suggests a deliberate use of evaluative language to both legitimize his own position and delegitimize opposing forces or alternative viewpoints.

c. Judgement Employed by Donald Trump

Table 4. Judgement Employed by Donald Trump

Judgement	Sub-Type	Frequency	Percentage
Social Esteem	Normality	2	6.45%
	Capacity	13	41.94%
	Tenacity	5	16.13%
Social Sanction	Propriety	10	32.26%
	Veracity	1	3.23%
Total		31	100%
Appraised		Frequency	Percentage
		Self	48.39%
		Other	51.61%
Judgement polarity		Frequency	Percentage
		Positive judgement	58.06%
		Negative judgement	41.94%

Table 4 outlines the breakdown of the Judgement system into its subcategories. Among 31 instances of Judgement, the subcategory of Capacity was the most frequently used, accounting for 41.94% of the data. These expressions were typically used to promote Trump's own abilities or to undermine the competence of others. Propriety followed with 32.26%, reflecting moral judgments about others' actions, particularly critiques of political opponents or institutions. Tenacity, which points to resolve or determination, appeared in 16.13% of cases, while Normality and Veracity were much less common, appearing in 6.45% and 3.23% of cases respectively. These distributions suggest that Trump's Judgement was largely built around capability and morality, framing himself as effective and principled, and others as incompetent or corrupt. Interestingly, the appraised targets in Judgement were almost equally split between the self (48.39%) and others (51.61%). This balance reflects a dual rhetorical strategy: building ethos through self-praise while attacking the credibility and character of others. The polarity of Judgement further supports this observation: 58.06% were positive, largely toward Trump himself or his allies, while 41.94% were negative, directed at perceived adversaries. This contrastive use of Judgement contributes to a polarized discourse structure that positions Trump as a powerful, righteous figure in opposition to flawed or failing actors.

3.2 Discussion

The findings from the Attitude analysis in Donald Trump's speech reveal significant patterns in how evaluative language is employed to construct political persona and ideological positioning. Three central dimensions such as type, target, and polarity of attitude highlight not only Trump's rhetorical strategies but also his communicative priorities when addressing sensitive topics such as foreign students and national policy. While previous linguistic analyses of Trump's speeches have predominantly focused on inaugural speeches, for example Potiatynyk & Orshynska (2020), (Chanturidze, 2018), meanwhile this study provides novel insight into his discursive stance on education and immigration, especially in relation to Harvard University's treatment of foreign students.

The analysis of evaluative meanings in Donald Trump's speech reveals a prominent use of Judgement as the dominant Attitude type, accounting for 44.29% of all identified instances. This suggests that Trump's rhetorical strategy is heavily grounded in assessments of human behavior, particularly judgments of capacity,

morality, and resolve. The majority of these expressions are directed toward both himself and others, but it is worth noting that positive Judgement is mostly self-referential, such as in *“I made that money,” “I brought inflation down,”* or *“I’m a lot tougher.”* These instances position Trump as competent, effective, and morally superior. This reflects what Martin & White (2005) identify as “self-promotional Judgement,” a common strategy in political discourse used to build personal ethos. In contrast, negative Judgement is often used to discredit his opponents as *“bad people,” “crazy,”* or *“morally wrong.”* These polarizing evaluations allow Trump to frame political debates not merely as policy disagreements but as moral confrontations.

The analysis also shows that the most frequently appraised target is ‘others’, accounting for over half of all Attitude instances across Affect, Appreciation, and Judgement. This includes political opponents, institutions like Harvard, foreign countries, and generalized groups such as the American public. Trump often frames these appraisals in oppositional terms, portraying others as either incompetent, corrupt, or threatening. For example, in his critique of Harvard’s treatment of foreign students, he uses both negative Judgement (*“disgraceful”*) and negative Appreciation (*“terrible politics”*) to construct the institution as unjust and ideologically flawed. This tendency to externalize blame reflects what Hoffmann (2025) refer to as the “us-versus-them” discourse in populist speech, where social polarization is constructed through constant evaluation of out-groups. On the other hand, positive evaluation of others is rare and often instrumental, used only to affirm allies or policies aligned with Trump’s own stance.

Furthermore, the findings show a clear dominance of negative polarity, comprising over 60% of all evaluative expressions. This trend is especially pronounced in Affect and Judgement, where dissatisfaction, disappointment, fear, and moral condemnation are recurrent themes. For instance, Trump repeatedly uses *“very disappointed”* and *“not happy”* to describe events or decisions he opposes. This prevalence of negative stance aligns with Fording & Schram (2017), who found that Trump often relies on emotionally charged, confrontational language to create urgency and mobilize support. However, this study extends their findings by showing how negative polarity is not only used in contexts like war or immigration, but also in educational and institutional critique, a dimension rarely explored in Trump-related discourse analysis. Through negative polarity, Trump intensifies problems, dramatizes failure, and positions himself as the solution to national decline even in domains like education and policy governance.

A deeper look at Trump’s evaluative stance toward Harvard’s treatment of foreign students reveals how language is used to ideologically reframe education policy within nationalist discourse. Through a combination of negative Judgement (*“they’re bad people”*), negative Appreciation (*“terrible politics”*), and dissatisfaction Affect (*“very disappointed”*), Trump positions the institution not only as administratively flawed, but as morally and ideologically corrupt. This strategic evaluation reframes the educational sphere typically seen as apolitical or neutral, into a site of political contestation. Unlike prior studies that focus on Trump’s rhetoric in domains of war, immigration, or economics, this analysis exposes a discursive shift where education becomes embedded in populist critique.

This finding shows in Trump’s speech, education is personalized and politicized, and elite institutions like Harvard are constructed as adversaries to national interest. His language elevates the position of foreign students typically marginalized in U.S. political discourse while simultaneously attacking the credibility of academic gatekeepers. This dual move allows Trump to align himself with both nationalist and globalist concerns, using Appraisal to construct a persuasive narrative in which education is no longer a neutral domain, but one deeply tied to ideological control, identity, and legitimacy.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Trump’s evaluative language functions not only to express opinions or judgments, but to reinforce a polarized worldview in which he is positioned as the competent and moral actor in contrast to failed or dangerous institutions. By combining dominant use of Judgement, frequent targeting of others, and overwhelmingly negative polarity, Trump constructs a discourse of superiority, confrontation, and urgency, now extended into the realm of education, where his previous discourse has rarely been analyzed. This broadens the scope of Appraisal research in political rhetoric and highlights the flexibility of Attitude systems in shaping ideological meaning across policy contexts.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined Donald Trump’s speech on Harvard’s treatment of foreign students through the lens of Appraisal Theory, specifically focusing on the Attitude system comprising Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation. The findings reveal that Trump’s rhetoric is saturated with evaluative language, particularly dominated by Judgement, which he employs to construct his political persona and frame ideological oppositions. His frequent use of positive self-judgement, highlighting his capacity, determination, and strategic competence serves to legitimize his own authority, while his negative judgement toward institutions like Harvard reflects a broader strategy of delegitimizing elite academic actors.

The data also show that Trump's Attitude expressions are predominantly directed toward others, especially institutions, policies, and perceived opponents, with relatively fewer self-referential evaluations. This pattern supports the populist dichotomy of "us versus them," where others are often blamed or discredited to reinforce in-group identity. Furthermore, the overall polarity of Trump's evaluative language leans heavily negative, especially in expressions of Affect and Judgement. This reflects a rhetorical approach grounded in critique, urgency, and confrontation, which not only dramatizes national issues but also positions Trump as a corrective force in moments of perceived institutional failure.

Importantly, this study contributes a new perspective to existing literature on Trump's discourse by highlighting how educational policy, particularly toward foreign students, is framed through strategic evaluation. While most previous research has concentrated on Trump's rhetoric in the contexts of war, immigration, and economy, this paper uncovers how similar evaluative strategies extend into the domain of higher education. By portraying elite institutions as ideologically flawed and foreign students as potential threats, Trump repurposes educational discourse to serve nationalist political goals. This underscores the broader implication that language, particularly evaluative language, is a powerful tool in shaping public perception and negotiating political legitimacy even in spaces as traditionally neutral as education.

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