

An Adaptation-Based Study on Attitude Resources in Political Discourse

—A Case Study of President Trump's State of the Union Address in 2018

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Abstract

Based on attitude system of appraisal theory as well as adaptation theory, this paper takes the State of the Union Address delivered by President Trump in 2018 as an example to study attitude resources in American political discourse and explores the communicative context adaptation mechanism behind such uses of attitude resources. It is found that a large number of attitude resources are distributed in American political discourse, among which appreciation resources are employed most frequently, followed by judgment resources and affect is the least-used resource, which is the result of President Trump's choice of language to adapt to his social role and mental motivation, psychology of the audience and readers, spatial features of US Capitol and so forth.

Keywords

Political Discourse, Attitude Resources, Adaptation Theory, State of the Union Address

1. Introduction

Politics and language are closely related. Politics carries language and language expresses politics in return. They complement and interact with each other. Orwell first discovered the political potential of language and claimed in *Politics and the English* that language can influence people's way of thinking, and political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible [1]. The State of the Union Address (SUA) is a typical and important political speech delivered by the President of the United States to the Congress at the beginning of each year. It focuses on summarizing the national conditions of the previous year and

announces the policy agenda in the next stage. Specifically, the President will sum up his accomplishments for the nation on the one hand, and explain his view and policies on many aspects such as national security, education, economy and so forth on the other. In addition, it also functions as a means for the President to popularize his policies and rebuild their confidence and something like that. It arouses worldwide attention since it plays a significant role in the accurate interpretation of the domestic and foreign policy trends and the stance of the US government. Probing into the SUA delivered by President Trump in 2018, it is found that a large number of attitude resources are distributed over the whole speech by President Donald Trump, to achieve his communicative purposes. Actually, studies of political discourse from appraisal theory have been studied by some scholars such as Xiaohong Yang [2], Tingting Liu [3] and Ge Qin [4], but they did not explain the influence of context leading to such uses of appraisal resources. According to Verschueren, the process of language using is the process of language choosing, and dynamic adaptation is made when language is used [5], which implies that adaptation theory can solve how the political discourse creator dynamically employs different sorts of attitude resources to adapt to the context and ultimately achieve his purposes. Therefore, this paper studies the attitude resources in political discourse and unravels the context adaptation mechanism behind such employment of resources through the case study of the SUA delivered by President Trump in 2018. It is hoped that this study will promote the understanding and interpretation of political discourse by the audience and readers including the other countries worldwide and shed light on the writing and delivery of SUA.

2. Theoretical Framework

Human beings employ language to produce objective description and to evaluate subjectively. Evaluation is not only the need of human communication, but also the central part of any discourse meaning [6]. Established by Martin and Peter White, appraisal theory is a breakthrough of interpersonal meta-function of Systemic Functional Grammar by extending it to the level of discourse semantics. It aims to explore how language users locate their stances, express their attitudes, construct their roles and negotiate with potential language receivers in the process of communication by means of evaluation [7]. According to Martin, the appraisal resources can be divided into three semantic domains: attitude, engagement and graduation and each of them forms its own system. Engagement system concerns with the source of the attitude, and it also serves as a means by which the language users adjust the responsibilities they assume for what they write/speak [8]. Based on the dialogism and heteroglossia of language put forward by Bakhtin, engagement system can be divided into two sub-types, that is, monogloss and heterogloss. Graduation is responsible for regulating the extent of the engagement of attitude resources with two sub-types, force and focus. The former adjusts the volume of the gradable attitude resources while the latter deals with the volume of ungradable resources. As the core of appraisal theory,

attitude system is defined by Martin and White [9] as a means used to express human feelings, judge behavior and evaluate the value of things, and thus three kinds of appraisal subcategories of attitude have been formed: affect, judgment and appreciation. This paper primarily focuses on the attitude system of appraisal theory.

Verschueren brought forth the adaptation theory which holds that language use is the process of continuous language choice [5]. He argued that any appropriate and successful communication is a process of adaptation and a result of it as well [10], and therefore the delivery of the SUA itself is also a dynamic process in which the deliverer makes linguistic choices according to the context. The theory explores the process of linguistic adaptation from four dimensions: contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, dynamics of adaptability and salience of the adaptation processes. The four perspectives of linguistic adaptation theory provides a coherent and unified framework for discourse interpretation, and play an important role in the choice of linguistic forms and strategies [11]. According the adaptation theory, “context” refers to the environment of language communication and all factors that adapt to discourse or affect discourse processing, including communicative context (consisting of physical world, social world, mental world and the communicators) and linguistic context, while this paper focuses chiefly on the communicative context which the President Trump adapted to by employing various attitude resources. Based on the combination of attitude system of appraisal theory and adaptation theory, an analytical mode can be established as follows (Figure 1). Political discourse creator, here the President Trump, selects attitude resources, specifically, affect, judgment and appreciation to adapt to the mental world, social world and physical world to realize his communicative goals, such as popularizing his policies and boosting citizens’ confidence and so on.

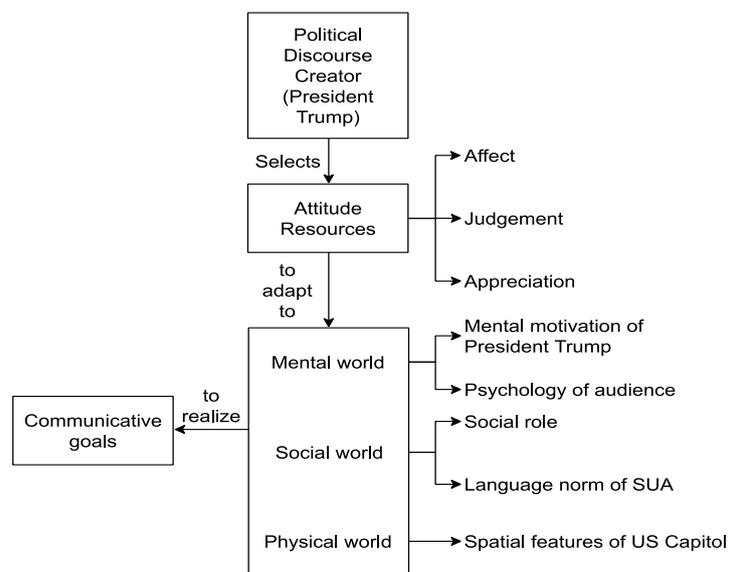


Figure 1. Analytical mode.

3. Research Methods

The President Donald Trump's SUA was delivered in US Capitol on 30th January, 2018 and the transcript is attainable on the official website of the White House (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>). Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are applied in this study. First, the author copies the transcript of this SUA totaling 5152 words from the website and makes it into corpus. Second, the attitude resources involved in the corpus are identified by the author and annotated manually with the assistance of UAM corpus Tool 3.3. Third, the local descriptive statistics will be shown in the table and described (local means the percentage in each subsystem is 100% and it tells the propensity to choose one feature against other features in the whole system). Last, how President Trump dynamically employed these resources to adapt to the communicative context and thus achieve his communicative goals will be unraveled.

4. Result

Local descriptive statistics of attitude resources in the corpus will be revealed in this section. The result is shown as follows after identification and manual annotation of attitude resources involved in SUA delivered by President Donald Trump (Tables 1-4).

Table 1. Attitude resources in President Trump's SUA.

ATTITUDE-TYPE	Number (N = 194)	Percentage (P = 100%)
Affect	45	23.20%
Judgment	65	33.51%
Appreciation	84	43.30%
ATTITUDE-POLARITY	Number (N = 194)	Percentage (P = 100%)
Positive-attitude	153	78.87%
Negative-attitude	41	21.13%
EXPLICITNESS	Number (N = 194)	Percentage (P = 100%)
Inscribed	110	56.70%
invoked	84	43.3%

Table 2. The distribution of appreciation resources.

APPRCIATION-TYPE	Number (N = 84)	Percentage (P = 100%)
Reaction	27	32.14%
Composition	6	7.14%
Social-valuation	51	60.71%

Table 3. The distribution of judgment resources.

JUDGMENT-TYPE	Number (N = 65)	Percentage (P = 100%)
Normality	1	1.54%
Capacity	22	33.85%
Tenacity	24	36.92%
Propriety	17	26.15%
Veracity	1	1.54%

Table 4. The distribution of affect resources.

AFFECT-TYPE	Number (N = 45)	Percent (P = 100%)
Un/happiness	10	22.22%
Dis/satisfaction	4	8.89%
In/security	3	6.67%
Dis/inclination	28	62.22%

5. Discussion

As can be seen from **Table 1**, appreciation is most frequently employed with 43.30%, followed by judgment and affect with 33.51% and 23.20% respectively. Besides, the SUA is generally in a positive tone with dominating positive attitude resources. In addition, more attitudes are expressed in an explicit manner instead of invoking.

5.1. Appreciation

Appreciation is employed to judge the value of “things”. Martin and White claims that appreciation can be divided into three types: our reaction to “things” (reaction), their composition and valuation [12]. Reaction is used to describe the impact on emotion; composition is related to the text, describing the complexity and details of an object; and valuation involves in the evaluation of objects, products and processes based on social criteria [13]. They are distributed as the table below.

As seen from **Table 2**, social-valuation resources far outnumber reaction and composition especially the latter. They are employed generally to adapt to the spatial features of US Capitol where the SUA was delivered, the mental motivation of President Trump and the psychology of the audience. To be specific, as is well known, US Capitol is a place in which solemn and extremely important activities corning the development of the county are held. The fact that the formality is the predominant spatial feature of US Capitol leads to the prevailing resources of appreciation in SUA which is comparatively more objective than affect and judgment. Besides, the negative valuation invoked is employed to reveal the drawbacks of the previous policies while positive valuation is expressly in an implicit way to take credit for what the President Trump and his Adminis-

tration have accomplished, to adapt to the Trump's motivation to popularize his policies and to smooth the acceptance of the policies by the American citizens. For example:

1) Our massive tax **cuts provide tremendous relief for the middle class and small businesses** (Attitude: Appreciation: + Social valuation, Invoked).

2) We eliminated an especially **cruel tax that fell mostly on Americans making less than \$50,000 a year**. (Attitude: Appreciation: -Social valuation, Invoked).

3) For decades, open borders **have allowed drugs and gangs to pour into our most vulnerable communities** (Attitude: Appreciation: -Social valuation, Invoked).

In example 1) and 2), President Trump invoked positive social-valuation attitudes from the audience towards his contribution on tax cuts, aiming at showing the merits of and achievements brought forth by his policies and evoking citizens' ongoing support. Just as the discourse choices need to adapt to the speaker's psychology, the speaker is always trying to adapt to his assessment of the audience's psychology when making discourse choices [10]. In order to gain people's acceptance of his policies, President Trump chose to invoke negative evaluation towards the previous policies in example 3) to adapt to the citizens' psychology that people are inclined to accept those things with advantages rather than proved drawbacks. In addition, the invoked attitude resources rather than inscribed ones in their accomplishments help to resume the image of President Trump by avoiding appearing complacent and aggressive.

5.2. Judgment

Judgment involves language users' evaluation of behavior of others, which can be divided into social sanction and social esteem [14]. According to Martin and White, social esteem concerns with the judgment of character and behavior in terms of normality (is s/he special), capacity (is s/he capable), tenacity (is s/he dependable) while social sanction conduct the evaluation from the views of veracity (is s/he honest) and propriety (is s/he beyond reproach). The employment of judgment resources in Trump's SUA is shown in the table below.

Table 3 tells that tenacity resources are employed most frequently with 36.82%, followed by capacity, 33.85%. Probing into the corpus, it is found that most of the appraised objects of tenacity are people dedicating to the U.S. society. By evaluating those people as dependable and praising them, President Trump successfully adapted to his social role as a president governing the whole country in the social world and his mental motivation of aligning the citizens. Moreover, the positive evaluations of the capacities of himself and his Administration are concert with his mental motivation of boosting people's confidence.

4) Through 18 hours of wind and rain, Ashlee **braved** (Attitude: Judgment: +Tenacity, Inscribed) live power lines and deep water, to help save more than 40 lives. Thank you, Ashlee.

5) Over the last year, we have **made incredible progress** (Attitude: Judgment: +Capacity, Invoked) and **achieved** (Attitude: Judgment: +Capacity, Invoked) extraordinary success.

Before making linguistic choices, communicators always deliberate linguistic expressions from various perspectives according to the needs of context and communicative goals in order to achieve communicative purposes smoothly [15]. In example 4), President Trump explicitly evaluated the behavior of Ashlee as dependable by using the word “braved” and extended his gratitude to him, which conforms to his role as a president managing the country. While in example 5), he invoked the positive evaluation of the capacities of himself and his Administration, which contributes to enhance citizens’ confidence towards the future under his governance.

5.3. Affect

Affect reflects the emotional reaction of human beings towards behavior/text/process and natural phenomenon and it is generally achieved through psychological reaction [16] and reflected in four aspects: un/happiness, in/security, dis/satisfaction and dis/inclination. By using these language resources, speakers express the influence of an event or phenomenon on their emotions, and evaluate them from an emotional perspective [17]. As can be seen from the statistics above, affect is the least-employed resource in the said corpus, which adapt to the language norm of the SUA requiring objectivity. In the corpus, the resources of inclination are used to adapt to the language norms of SUA in which the report of the actions/policies in the next stage is needed, and to the mental motivation of Trump in expressing his solicitude to the welfare of American. Ultimately his communicative goal of winning public support is thus achieved.

6) We **will** (Attitude: Affect: +Inclination, Inscribed) continue our fight until ISIS is defeated.

7) I **want** (Attitude: Affect: +Inclination, Inscribed) our youth to grow up to achieve great things. I **want** (Attitude: Affect: +Inclination, Inscribed) our poor to have their chance to rise.

President Trump proposed his inclination to continuously struggle against ISIS, which can be deemed as an adaptation to the requirements of SUA in which the plans in the next stage should be reported. In example 7), the emoter is President Trump and the trigger is the welfare of American citizens. He showed his desire for the well-beings of the youth and the poor to adapt to the mental motivation in extending his caring for them, so as to ultimately gain their support.

In this section, the author explores the distribution characteristics of the attitude resources and their realizations by specific examples in the SUA delivered by President Trump in 2018. Besides, the communicative context adaptation leading to such way of choosing attitude resources is uncovered. Quantitative statistics shows that appreciation is used most frequently, followed by judgment,

while affect is used least by Trump, which primarily result from the adaptation to the social role of Trump, language norm of SUA, metal motivation of Trump as well as the psychology of audience, and spatial features of US Capitol, so as ultimately achieve Trump's communicative goals such as strengthening citizens' confidence towards his policies and so forth.

6. Conclusion

This paper establishes an analytical mode to study the adaptation of attitude resources based on the combination of attitude system of appraisal theory and adaptation theory. To be specific, it analyzes the employment of attitude resources in SUA in the framework of appraisal theory and explores how political discourse creator, here the President Trump, dynamically adopts these resources to adapt to the communicative context and ultimately achieves his communicative goals. It is found that various resources are used for the adaptation to the mental motivation of President Trump, psychology of the audience or readers, social role of Trump, language norm of SUA and spatial features of US Capitol where the SUA was delivered and so on. It is hoped that this study can give reference to the interpretation and understanding of political discourse and shed light on the writing and delivery of political discourse especially SUA.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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