

Appraisal Research: A Model of Critical Reading*

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Reading is a process of negotiation and interaction between readers and writers. Critical Reading of a text is achieved chiefly by figuring out the attitudes, viewpoints, and ideology of the writer, also termed as evaluative resources in Appraisal Theory. This paper carries out an appraisal research into a reading passage taken from TEM-8 paper in hope of helping English majors to cultivate their Critical Reading ability by offering them a practical and implementable reading model.

Keywords: Appraisal Theory, Critical Reading, English majors

Introduction

Internet offers English majors of China even at home very convenient and quick access to information from other parts of the world. A lot of English reading is an effective way for them to learn language and gain an insight into politics, economy, cultures, and social customs of English-speaking countries. English is learned in China as a foreign language, but reading is not simply a process of language learning. Writers and readers of texts always live in a certain society; hence they are definitely influenced by its economy, politics, and ideology. When an author writes, his attitudes and values are expressed in an inscribed way or in an evoked way by lexico-grammatical pattern he chooses. The process of one's reading is actually the process of negotiation of meanings between him and the writer. He may accept, suspect, or deny the author's viewpoints, attitudes, values, or ideology. If English learners could not recognize the added meanings loaded in the text, their reading comprehension is passive, incomplete, and superficial, not critical. At present, how to cultivate and improve English majors' Critical Reading ability is what English teachers should first consider. It cannot be denied that Critical Reading, as a higher level of reading, is achieved on the basis of language accumulation. To English majors in third or fourth year, after a few years of English learning, their listening, speaking, reading, translating, and writing have been greatly enhanced, at the same time, their knowledge of English cultures has also been increased. Their linguistic abilities will enable them to obtain experiential meanings of a text without many difficulties. Therefore, they are able to be released from the task of experiential meaning acquisition so as to think about and question what is loaded additionally in language by the author. That is to say, they can try reading critically. The ability to read critically cannot be obtained automatically with the improving language abilities, and it needs to be cultivated on purpose (TANG, 2010).

Appraisal Theory, developing within the framework of Systemic Function Linguistics, is the further development of Interpersonal Meaning. Appraisal is "a particular approach to exploring, describing and

* **Acknowledgments:** This paper is supported by Sichuan Foreign Languages and Literature Research Center in the name of "Research on College Students' Critical Reading Ability from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory" (Grant No. SCWYGJ15-16).

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explaining the way language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personas and to manage interpersonal positionings and relationships” (White, 2001, p. 12). It is more concerned with linguistic resources of evaluation, attitude, and emotion and those that make the writer’s/text’s propositions and proposals interpersonal (LI, 2002, p. 282). Obviously, what is Appraisal Theory concerned with overlaps what is required by Critical Reading to a certain degree. According to LIU (2002), Critical Reading is the bridge between the evaluative resources in the text and the evaluation of the text. Hence this paper aims to show how to recognize added meanings in a text by using Appraisal Theory as a text analysis tool in hope of helping English majors to achieve Critical Reading ability.

Critical Reading and Appraisal Theory

China is in the critical period of building a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way and comprehensively deepening reform and accelerating the transformation of economic development mode, so the cultivation of innovative talents is very important and urgent. First of all, innovative talents must be endowed with the ability to think critically. Ideal critical thinker should be curious, well-informed, alert to the problems, prudent in judgement, happy to rethink, and attentively involved in research (WU & ZHOU, 2010). Criticism is an individual and independent appreciative activity which is clearly judgement-oriented and value-oriented (SU & WEI, 2012). Critical Reading is one of the most effective ways to cultivate critical thinking. According to N. S. Smith (1985), an American psychologist, psychological process of reading is divided into four levels: Literal Comprehension, Interpretation, Critical Reading, and Creative Reading. Critical Reading is a form of skepticism that does not take a text at face value, but involves an examination of claims put forward in the text as well as implicit bias in the texts framing and selection of the information presented (Wikipedia, 2016). English majors in their third or fourth year, most of them can understand texts literally in all kinds of genres, but whether they can recognize ideas, viewpoints, and ideology implied in reading materials and then form their own judgement from their own reading positioning are still in question. How to cultivate students’ Critical Reading ability has been the research focus of many Chinese scholars recently. The survey in CNKI database from 2005–2015 shows that there are about 81 papers, concerning theory exploration, empirical study. However, there are few researches dealing with combination of Critical Reading and Appraisal Theory.

Appraisal Theory is an extension and development of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics. According to Martin (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 22), “Appraisal is concerned with evaluation, namely attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings that is involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers are aligned”. How a text constructs evaluative or ideological contacts with its potential readers is what Appraisal Theory is concerned about. Appraisal Theory was first introduced to China by WANG (2001, p. 13). He systemically introduced the background knowledge of Appraisal Theory, and its framework and its operation and made a prediction of the prospect of Appraisal theory. Another important scholar who plays an important role in the development of Appraisal Theory in China is LI. LI (2004, p. 3) discussed the relationship between evaluation and culture models and pointed out that analyzing evaluative meaning in cultural models is helpful in the learning and teaching of culture. These two scholars together with other Chinese scholars and teachers have already pushed the research of Appraisal Theory in China into a flourishing stage. Appraisal Theory is composed of three systems, each of which has its own sub-systems. The framework of Appraisal Theory is illustrated as follows (see Figure 1):

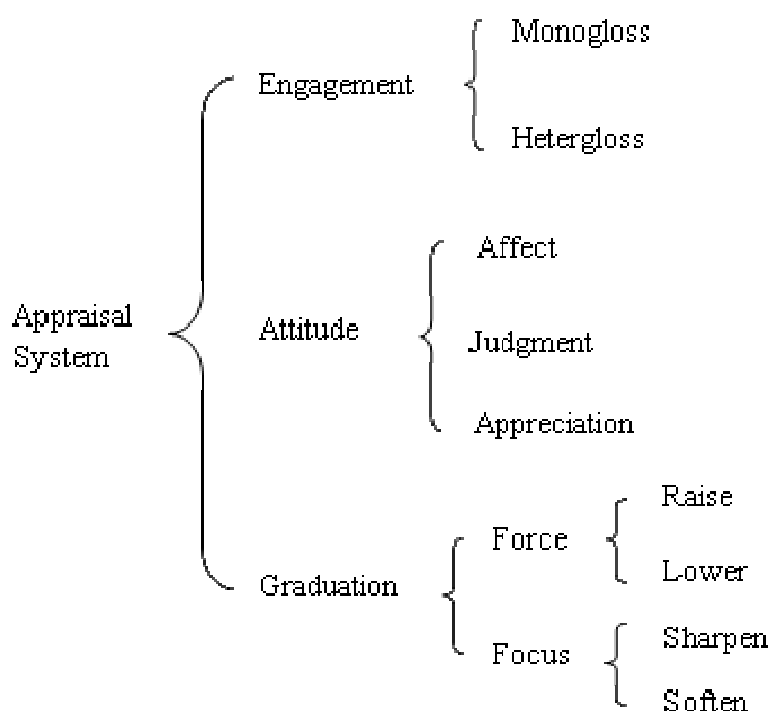


Figure 1. An overview of appraisal resources (From Martin & White, 2008, p. 38).

Welker (1999) believes that teachers should guide their students to read critically and the main method is to directly guide the students to separate facts from opinions of reading materials. Reading is never a one-directional process, and it is a process in which a reader and a writer are in a constant negotiation and interaction. On the one hand, a writer passes on viewpoints, attitudes, and ideology encoded in the text explicitly or implicitly to the readers; on the other hand, the readers are not simply satisfied with experiential meanings, trying to discern or recognize the added interpersonal meanings in the text in hope of achieving Critical Reading. Appraisal Theory, as a text analysis tool, it has proved applicable to the study of a wide range of areas including the media (Iedema & White, 1994), history texts (Coffin, 1997), advertisement (Thompson & Thetela, 1995) conversation (Eggins & Slade, 1997), critical literary writings (Rothery & Stenglin, 2000), literary response texts (Machen-Horarik, 2003), etc. A new model of Critical Reading within the framework of Appraisal Theory will be presented as follows in hope of shedding a light on the cultivation of English majors Critical Reading ability.

Application of Appraisal Theory to Reading Material

The sample text is taken from reading comprehension of Test for English Majors-Band 8.¹ This passage is not written in recondite words and complicated sentence structures, but some students' comprehension is still not very satisfactory. One of the reasons may be that they are only contented with the literal meaning of the text and neglect the implied meaning.

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This sample text is made up of eight paragraphs, altogether 627 words. It focuses on the new college-entrance system in South Korea which places more emphasis on grades in the three years of high school and less on nationwide SAT-style and other selection tests. This implement aims to reduce the rising education gap between the wealthy students and poor students and free the high school students from the cram school. However, this reform stirs violent ripples among the students, parents as well as colleges. The following analysis will first identify the linguistic resources that realize the evaluation, and then try to demonstrate how they contribute to the interpersonal or subjective meaning of the text. (In the following appraisal analysis, “+” stands for positive, “-” for negative, and over striking for the most relevant appraisal values. All the appraisal analyses are put in the square brackets. The sample text is in italicized form.)

At the age of 16, Lee HyukJoon’s life is a living hell [Appreciation: - reaction: impact] [Engagement: proclaim]. *The South Korean 10th grader gets up at 6 in the morning to go to school, and studies most of the day* [Graduation: intensification: quality] *until returning home at 6 p.m. After dinner, it’s time to hit the books again—at one of Seoul’s many so-called* [Appreciation: -composition] *cram schools. Lee gets back home at 1 in the morning, sleeps less than* [Graduation: intensification: quality] *five hours, then repeats* [Affection: -happiness] *the routine—five days a week. It’s a grueling* [Appreciation: - reaction: impact] *schedule, but Lee worries* [Affection: -security] *that it may not be good enough to get him into a top* [Appreciation: + valuation] *university. Some of his classmates study even* [Graduation: intensification: process] *harder.*

At the very beginning of the text, the author’s negative attitude attributed to the 16-aged Lee HyukJoon’s high school life is explicitly denoted by “a living hell”, and this negative appreciation reflects how terrible Lee HyukJoon’s life is. At the same time, this appreciation is presented through the voice of the reporter, so it is monoglossic and the readers may be extremely influenced by this kind of taken-for-granted statement. Therefore, they may tend to accept this kind of appreciation. Next the author describes Lee HyukJoon’s life of a day—studying which is amplified by linguistic resources of graduation—“most of the day”. That is not quite enough for him, and after school, he had to go to the cram school. The word “so-called” implicitly expresses the author’s negative evaluation to the cram school. Sleeping “less than” five hours further enhances this kind of negative evaluation. Indeed, it is a very hash and severe schedule. The attitudinal meaning of appreciation is conveyed by the word “grueling”. The two verbs “repeat” and “worries” are loaded with a sense of negative affection, which implies the student’s unhappy feeling about the routine and insecure feeling about the possibility of entering a top college.

From the appraisal analysis above, we can know that the beginning of the text conveys to the readers such signals that the life of a high school student in South Korea is very terrible. In this single paragraph, there are four Appreciation (three negative and one positive), two Graduation, two negative Affection and one Engagement. Appreciation takes up 50% percentage in this paragraph, which stresses the negative evaluation about the life of a high school student.

South Korea’s education system has long been highly [Graduation: intensification: quality] *competitive* [Appreciation: —reaction: impact]. *But for Lee and the other 700,000 high-school sophomores in the country, high-school studies have gotten even more* [Graduation: intensification: quality] *intense* [Appreciation: — reaction: impact]. *That’s because South Korea has conceived a new college-entrance system, which will be implemented in 2008. This year’s 10th graders will be the first group evaluated by the new admissions standard, which places more emphasis* [Graduation: intensification: quality] *on grades in the three years of high school and less* [Graduation: intensification: quality] *on nationwide SAT-style and other selection tests,*

which have traditionally determined which students go to the elite colleges.

The paragraph involves mostly the evaluative resources of Appreciation and Graduation. Among them Graduation is foregrounded by percentage of 67% over 33% of Appreciation. “Competitive” originally means something positive, but here the author turns it into a negative Appreciation by intensifying Graduation resource of “has long been highly”. Therefore author’s position that the Korea’s education system is too much to the students is implicitly expressed in this way. If the new admission standard is adopted, the student’s pressures will be excessively enforced judging by the Graduation resource such as “even more”, “more emphasis”, and “less”. The two Appreciation values are targeted on the Korean’s education system and the students’ study after the new system respectively, and the four graduation values further amplify these negative attitudinal meanings of Appreciation. The two kinds of sub-categories are combined together to continue the negative evaluation of the new college-entrance system. The readers will be greatly naturalized by the interpersonal meaning revealed in the text; therefore, they would easily accept this kind of evaluation.

The change was made mostly [Graduation: intensification: quality] to reduce what the government says [Engagement : attribute] is a growing [Graduation: intensification: quality] education gap [Appreciation: — composition] in the country: wealthy [Judgment : + propriety] students go to the best [Appreciation: + reaction: quality] colleges and get the best [Appreciation: + reaction: quality] jobs, keeping the children of poorer [Judgment: — propriety] families on the social margins [Judgment: — propriety]. The aim is to reduce the importance of costly [Judgment : — propriety] tutors and cram schools, partly to help students enjoy a more [Graduation: intensification] normal [Appreciation: + composition] high-school life. But [Engagement: counter-expect] the new system has had the opposite [Appreciation: — composition] effect. Before, students didn’t worry [Affection: — security] too much about their grade-point averages; the big challenge was beating the standardized tests as high-school seniors. Now students are competing against one another over a three-year period, and every midterm and final test is crucial [Appreciation: — valuation]. Fretful [Affection: — security parents] are relying even more heavily [Graduation: intensification] on tutors and cram schools to help their children succeed.

As illustrated above, the evaluation of the present situation of Korea’s education offered by the discourse is the existence of an education gap. This evaluation is not made by the author, but by the government. It is clear that the government should be responsible for the proposition. Therefore, the author adopts the dialogistic expansion of “the government” under “attribute” to actively open up the dialogic space to alternatives. The readers, based on their own ideological background and value, can accept or refuse this proposition. Under the Judgment of “wealth, poorer, social margin”, this gap is thus made specific and the contrast is formed. The Engagement of “But” brings out the result of the new college-entrance system that is contrary to what is expected, and in this way the linkage between the new college-system and the opposite effect is built up.

Parents and kids have sent thousands of [Graduation: quantification: number] angry [Affection: insecurity] online letters to the Education Ministry complaining [Engagement: Attribute] that the new admissions standard is setting students against each other [Judgment: normality]. “One can succeed only when others fail”, as one parent said [Engagement: Attribute].

Parents and kids are the most influenced by the new entrance system and their negative emotive expression (anger and complaining) to the new system, to a great extent, will evoke the same feeling of antipathy among some readers. Therefore these readers can arrive at the same attitude towards the new system. To foreground

the negative affection this paragraph indirectly offers a source of emotion for the latter implicit Judgment (*setting students against each other*) that the new system put students under competition with everyone. The extra voice of the kids and parents become a strong evidence to attack the new system.

Education experts say [Engagement: Attribute] *that South Korea's public secondary-school system is foundering* [Appreciation: — Composition], *while private education is thriving* [Appreciation: — Composition]. *According to critics* [Engagement: Attribute], *the country's high schools are almost uniformly mediocre* [Appreciation: — Composition]—*the result of an egalitarian* [Judgment: — normality] *government education policy. With the number of elite schools strictly controlled* [Appreciation: — reaction] *by the government, even the brightest* [Graduation: intensification: quality] *students typically have to settle for ordinary schools in their neighborhoods, where the curriculum is centered on average students. To make up for the mediocrity, zealous* [Judgment: — normality] *parents send their kids to the expensive* [Appreciation: — valuation] *cram schools.*

This passage introduces the reasons and the effects of the new system as well as the influence that it brings to people of different interests. This topic of the text decides the heteroglossic foundation of this passage. Besides parents and kids, the text projects the positions of the education experts and the critics as a range of possible alternatives. In this way can it present an overall viewpoint to the reader, and based on it the readers can accept or refuse one of the possible alternatives form their own judgment. Either the experts or critics unexceptionally do not sing high of the present educational system from their attitudinal evaluations of Appreciation “foundering, thriving, mediocre and strictly controlled”.

Students in affluent southern Seoul neighborhoods complain [Engagement: Attribute] [Affection: — satisfaction] *that the new system will hurt* [Affection: unhappiness] *them the most* [Graduation: quantification; number]. *Nearly all* [Graduation: quantification; number] *Korean high schools will be weighted equally* [Appreciation: + balance] *in the college-entrance process, and relatively* [Graduation: Force] *weak* [Judgment: — capacity] *students in provincial schools, who may not score well* [Judgment: — capacity] *on standardized tests, often compile good grade-point average* [Judgment: + capacity].

Some universities, particularly [Graduation: sharpen] *prestigious* [Appreciation: + reaction] *ones, openly complain* [Engagement: Attribute] [Affection: — satisfaction] *that they cannot select* [Judgment: — capacity] *students under the new system because it eliminates differences among high schools. They've asked for more* [Graduation: quantification: number] *discretion in picking students by giving more* [Graduation: quantification: number] *weight to such screening tools as essay writing or interviews.*

As is shown in the appraisal analysis above, the text offers the different positions on the new system and also explicitly expresses their dissatisfaction by use of Engagement value targeted on “*students in affluent southern Seoul neighborhoods*” and “*Some universities, particularly prestigious one*”. The students in affluent southern Seoul neighborhoods do not welcome this new system, because it hurts them the most. While to the weak students in the provincial school, the new system may put them to an advantageous position. Because the Judgment value of “*weak*” and “*may not score well*” may imply that the old system centered on the standard texts possibly make slow students confronted with slightest hope of entering college. However the new system focusing more on the performance in the three-year of high school may increase their hope of entering college. Colleges, especially prestigious colleges also hold negative evaluation towards the new system indicated by “*complain* [Engagement: Attribute] [Affection: dissatisfaction]” and “*cannot select* [Judgment: capacity]”.

President Roh Moo Hyun doesn't like [Engagement: denial] [Affection: unhappiness] *how some colleges*

are trying to circumvent [Judgment: + tenacity] *the new system. He recently criticized* [Engagement: attribute] [Affection: –satisfaction] “*greedy*” [Judgment: –propriety] *universities that focus more on finding the best students than trying to* [Judgment: –tenacity] “*nurture good students*”. *But* [Engagement: count-expect] *amid the crossfire between the government and universities, the country’s 10th graders are feeling the stress. On online protest sites, some are calling themselves “a cursed generation* [Judgment: –propriety]” and “*mice in a lab experiment* [Judgment: –propriety]”. *It all seems* [Engagement: entertain] *a touch melodramatic* [Appreciation: –balance], *but* [Engagement: count-expect] *that’s the South Korean school system.*

In the last paragraph, another extra voice is introduced to enhance the heteroglossic context of the whole text under the Engagement value “*President Roh Moo Hyun doesn’t like*” and “*He recently criticized*”. The president’s criticism to some colleges, from another aspect, indicates that he is in favor of the new system. But the ten-grade students who are directly involved in the crossfire between government and college judge them as “*a cursed generation*” and “*mice in a lab experiment*”. Their self-judgment will strongly evoke the reader’s sympathy with them, and then align them with the readers.

Based on the above detailed appraisal analysis, it seems that the reporter very objectively presents the attitudes and viewpoints of different sides about the new entrance system. His own evaluation cannot be easily discerned at the first sight. In the whole news, 33 out of 42 attitudinal evaluations are negative which directed at the life of a high school student as well as the new entrance system in Korea. And all these evaluations are mostly realized by the adjectives and nouns which are loaded with strong negative sense. The reporter’s choices of strong negative words are not purposeless. This kind of choices is an implicit expression of the reporter’s attitudes—his disapproval of the new system. While the dominant sub-type of engagement in sample two is “attribute” which takes up 58%. “Attribution” means the proposition being advanced is associated with viewpoints of external voices. The reporter’s own position about the new college-entrance system is implied through offering the different origins of the propositions. Because the external voices in this passage are almost negative evaluation of the new entrance system, the reporter chooses and emphasizes this negative evaluation, which in turn expresses the reporter’s attitude.

Conclusion

Language is not as a kind of objective and transparent neutral agent as previous scientists claimed. It is a kind of social practice, an eternal engagement of social order. It reflects the social reality from all perspectives, and controls and influences social process by reproduction of ideology (LIU, 2006, p. 176). It can be inferred from what is discussed above that a writer, consciously or unconsciously, adopts various linguistic resources to scatter his attitudes, viewpoints, ideology among the whole text. Appraisal Theory, as a very effective text analysis tool, can systemically and thoroughly probe into the linguistic resources that construct the subjectivity in the text that may influence the reader’s comprehension. So it can be expected that this tentative combination of Critical Reading and Appraisal Theory may bring some enlightenment to the teachers confronted with how to cultivate English majors’ Critical Reading ability. At present, the training activities in reading class are still around the knowledge in grammar and vocabulary. In most cases, English majors are busy with figuring out the experiential meanings of the reading materials, and they have no awareness or have no ability to dig out the implied meanings hidden in the material. One of the reasons is that in reading class the teachers seldom mention or introduce some theories that can help English majors to gain Critical Reading. The model of Critical

Reading under Appraisal Theory proposed in this paper is a preliminary research that may benefit English Majors' ability to read critically. Application of Appraisal Theory to Critical Reading is a field that needs further researches by more teachers and scholars in the years to come.

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