

# A Research on Interpersonal Meaning of Belt and Road initiative in News Discourse Based on Attitude System

Peiting Lin

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu, China

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**Abstract:** Based on the attitude system of the appraisal theory, this study constructs a corpus by taking news reports related to the Belt and Road initiative from the *China Daily* website between September 2013 and December 2022. By marking and analyzing the subsystems of the attitude system and combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, this study explores the strategies of utilizing attitude resources in those news reports and the interpersonal meanings reflected. The research findings are as follows: (1) Authors of news reports widely employ positive attitude resources, following the distribution pattern of "judgment resources > appreciation resources > affective resources," indicating their objective stance when reporting on the development and impact of the initiative. (2) The extensive use of judgment and appreciation resources demonstrates the recognition and participation of multiple countries in the Belt and Road initiative, showcasing China's commitment to global development and its positive image of actively assisting and driving other countries for mutual benefits. (3) By studying the distribution of attitude resources and the interpersonal meanings in news discourse, this study helps news media better shape the national image.

**Keywords:** The Appraisal Theory, Attitude System, News Discourse, the Belt and Road Initiative.

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## 1. Introduction

The establishment of systemic functional linguistics has redirected researchers' focus to the functional aspects of language rather than its form, injecting vitality into linguistic research. Its founder Halliday (1970) proposed three metafunctions of language - ideational, interpersonal and textual functions, which are the core concepts of Systemic functional linguistics. Among them, interpersonal function refers to the ability of language to engage in communicative behavior [1]. Halliday (1985) focused on the tone and modality of interpersonal functions in his book *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* [2]. Since Halliday ignored the analysis at the lexical level when analyzing interpersonal function, Martin (2000) of the University of Sydney established the appraisal theory, expanded the interpersonal function, and studied how to express various attitudes and emotions through the use of evaluative resources [3].

Since China put forward the Belt and Road initiative in 2013, it has been nearly a decade since its inception. During this period, the initiative has garnered significant attention and generated a wide range of discussions and debates among scholars, policymakers, and the general public worldwide. In the research on the Belt and Road initiative from the perspective of the appraisal theory, some scholars have investigated the viewpoints of many countries and communities on the Belt and Road initiative through the analyses of relevant news reviews, including the USA, India and the European Union (Tang & Shi, 2018[4]); Italy (Dong, 2019[5]); British (Long, 2022[6]) and so on. Based on those analyses, it can be observed that an overwhelming majority of foreign media outlets have adopted a favorable and supportive position when it comes to the Belt and Road initiative. Some scholars have adopted the subsystems of the appraisal theory as their research perspective to conduct comparative analyses of news on the Belt and Road initiative between China and the foreign countries using self-built corpora (Xin & Wu,

2018[7]; Zhu & Meng, 2021[8]). It is found that most foreign media have a positive and supportive attitude towards the Belt and Road initiative, but they differ from China in terms of the means of engagement, attitude, and graduation resources used. Some scholars also take the news discourse on the Belt and Road initiative in *China Daily* as the research object. (Jiang & Chen, 2017[9]; Liu & Zhang, 2020[10]). For example, Liu et al (2020) selected 100 news reports from the *China Daily* published between January 2014 and December 2018 that were focused on theme of the Belt and Road initiative to establish a small-scale corpus. Their analysis revealed that in terms of attitude resources, there was a general pattern of "appreciation vocabulary > emotional vocabulary > judgment vocabulary". They also proposed the need for a discourse analysis framework to enhance the discourse coherence of news narratives on the Belt and Road initiative, emphasizing the significance of paying attention to the structural aspects of news discourse.

Although some scholars have used the corpus research paradigm to analyze the evaluative resources of the Belt and Road initiative in *China Daily*, the mainstream newspaper in China with a wide readership, high visibility and authority, the small size of the corpus they used may not fully reflect the overall trend and pattern of language use. Therefore, by using a larger corpus sample, the statistical reliability of the research results will be improved. In order to ensure the timeliness and adequacy of the corpus, this study retrieved and selected a total of 5776 news reports from *China Daily* website, covering the period from September 2013 to December 2022, regarding the Belt and Road initiative. A self-built corpus was created, and the AntConc corpus analysis and retrieval tool was utilized to investigate the interpersonal meanings of attitude resources in the news related to the Belt and Road initiative, explore the strategies of attitude resource usage, and examine the construction of the Chinese image within it.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Theoretical Basis

In 1996, Martin published the relevant research on the appraisal theory at the International Conference on Systemic functional linguistics and took this theory as the curriculum content of master's students. In 2000, Martin's publication on the appraisal theory has garnered significant attention, bringing theory to the forefront of academic discussion[3]. Huston and Thompson (2000) proposed three functions of evaluation, including expressing the views of language users, building and maintaining a good relationship between both parties, organizing and coordinating discourse[11]. Martin&White (2005) detailed the three subsystems (attitude, intervention and graduation) of the appraisal theory, holding the view that the attitude system is at the core of the appraisal theory[12]. Zhang (1998) first introduced the appraisal theory into China and explained and analyzed its subsystems. However, due to the immature framework of the appraisal theory, it did not receive significant attention in China[13]. Wang (2001) reintroduced the appraisal theory into China and provided a detailed introduction. He believed that by analyzing language, language users' positions, viewpoints, and attitudes towards the situation can be evaluated[14]. As a result, the appraisal theory began to gain attention in China. Martin and Rose (2003) divided the appraisal theory into attitude, engagement, and graduation systems, bringing new perspectives to discourse analysis[15]. Wang and Qu (2020) proposed that language modality is the research object of evaluation in China, and evaluation semantics can also be expressed through non-linguistic modalities[16].

### 2.2. Core Content

The appraisal theory consists of three systems: attitude system, engagement system, and graduation system. The attitude system refers to the judgments and appreciation made by people after being influenced. The intervention system mainly analyzes the subjectivity and objectivity of language users reflected in the text, and explains the relationship between users and readers. The graduation system mainly studies the increase and decline of attitudes, and this degree is gradable.

The attitude system can be further divided into affect, judgment, and appreciation based on semantics. Among them, emotion refers to the expression of people's emotions and feelings, which is usually achieved through psychological and relational processes, and can be divided into four aspects: dis/inclination, un/happiness, in/security, dis/satisfaction. The judgment system evaluates the behavior of language users through morality and law, which can be divided into social evaluation and social constraints. The appreciation system can be divided into three subsystems: reaction, composition, and valuation, which are used to evaluate texts and phenomena. In summary, the attitude system is the evaluation of people or things. Both the affect and judgment systems can evaluate people, while the affect and appreciation systems can evaluate things. There are positive and negative effects and explicit and implicit effects in the attitude system.

## 3. Research Design

### 3.1. Research Corpus and Research Questions

This study mainly uses "One Belt One Road (Initiative)", "The Belt and Road (Initiative)" and "Silk Road" as the search

words, and selects news reports on the "the Belt and Road" on *China Daily* website from September 2013 to December 2022 as the research corpus. Then, the selected 5776 reports are purified, and irrelevant information (such as author, publication time, etc.) in the text is deleted, and only the text contents are retained. Based on the attitude subsystem of evaluation theory, this study uses AntConc 4.1.1 for retrieval, and then manually selects and determines the attitude resources in the reports. By analyzing these attitude resources, this study aims to explore the following two issues. (1) What is the distribution pattern of attitude resources in the news related to the "the Belt and Road Initiative", and what is the interpersonal meaning expressed? (2) What kind of image of China has these attitude resources constructed?

### 3.2. Research Methods

This study adopts a corpus-based research paradigm, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. Using the search terms "One Belt One Road (Initiative)", "The Belt and Road (Initiative)", and "Silk Road", index lines are generated on Antconc 4.1.1 to discern and statistically analyze the distribution and frequency of three subsystems: **affect, judgment and appreciation**. The study also analyzes the usage strategies of attitude resources in their external propaganda reports on the Belt and Road initiative, aiming to explore the interpersonal meanings conveyed by these attitude resources and the constructed image of China.

## 4. Data Analysis

As the core of the appraisal theory, the attitude system showcases the language resources used to express attitudes in news discourse. Evaluators directly use their own opinions or indirectly use others' opinions to express emotions, judgments, and appreciation of events or characters. By searching the corpus, classifying and analyzing the corpus, the proportion of affect, judgment, and appreciation resources is calculated as shown in [Table 1](#). According to the table, it can be observed that the judgment resources have the highest frequency of use, appearing 6122 times, accounting for 38.2% of the total. The appreciation resources come next, appearing 5357 times, accounting for 36.1%. The affect resources have the lowest frequency of use, appearing 3372 times, accounting for 22.7%.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Attitude Resources

The Attitude System	Times	Percentage
Affect	3372	22.7%
Judgment	6122	41.2%
Appreciation	5357	36.1%
Total	14851	100%

In order to ensure that news reports meet the basic principles of timeliness, authenticity, and objectivity, news discourses are often narrative-based, providing objective and accurate descriptions of recent events and promptly conveying information about individuals or incidents. To uphold the objectivity of the reporting, the usage of subjective affect resources are minimized, while more judgment and appreciation resources are employed, showcasing the objective, serious, and cautious writing characteristics of news discourse. Judgment resources account for the majority, as political news often involves evaluating the reasonability and legality of national actions and policies, and relevant viewpoints are confirmed through social commentary.

#### 4.1. Characteristics of Affect Resources Distribution

The affect system reflects the subjective feelings of language users, mainly in four aspects. Among them, dis/inclination refers to whether the subject is willing to take action for success. Un/happiness refers to whether the individual's emotions are pleasant or not. In/security refers to whether the subject is confident in success; Dis/satisfaction refers to whether the subject is satisfied in the process of achieving the goal.

According to the data in Table 2, the highest number of emotion resources is found in the category of in/security, with a total of 1772 instances, accounting for 45.1% of the total. Common expressions in this category include "together" and "confident," with significantly more positive expressions than negative ones. This demonstrates China's confidence and willingness to cooperate and achieve mutual benefits with other countries in the reporting of the Belt and Road Initiative. The second highest is the category of dis/satisfaction, with 1422 instances, accounting for 43.4% of the total. Frequently used expressions in this category include "involved" and "satisfied," reflecting the satisfaction and admiration from various parties towards the Belt and Road Initiative.

**Table 2.** Distribution of Affect Resources

The Affect System	Times	Percentage
Dis/inclination	241	7.3%
Un/happiness	237	7.2%
In/security	1772	45.1%
Dis/satisfaction	1422	43.4%
Total	3372	100%

Example 1: As the national carrier of Turkey, Turkish Airlines is helping connect the two countries with each other and beyond, confident that the initiative will create increased opportunities.

Example 2: ... and another 45 foreign business from countries *involved* in "the Belt and Road Initiative" will gather in Gansu to showcase their TCM products.

The word "confident" in Example 1 belongs to the category of safety resources. As the national airline of Turkey, Turkish Airlines believes that "the Belt and Road Initiative" will create more opportunities. *China Daily* adopts a reported speech approach, avoiding subjective emotions and shifting the responsibility of the discourse. Through the perspective of Turkish Airlines, it showcases the benefits that the Initiative brings to Turkey. The word "involved" in Example 2 belongs to the category of satisfaction resources, reflecting the wide involvement of countries and the numerous platforms and opportunities provided by the initiative.

#### 4.2. Characteristics of Judgment Resources Distribution

The judgment system is mainly related to morality and law, reflected in social evaluation and social constraints. Social evaluation includes three aspects: normality, capability, and reliability, respectively emphasizing the degree of specificity, ability, and dependability of things. Social constraints are reflected in honesty and legitimacy, judging the honesty of events and the legitimacy of actions taken by judgment resources.

Judgment resources are the most frequent among the three types of attitude resources, accounting for 41.2%. This

reflects the news discourse authors' judgment of China's capabilities and the outcomes of multi-party cooperation demonstrated in the Belt and Road Initiative, based on moral standards and legal values. From the data in Table 3, it can be seen that social evaluation resources are more than social constraints resources. Among them, the frequency of the emergence of capability resources is the highest, accounting for 30.1%, with representative expressions such as "facility" and "strength". Secondly, reliability resources account for 22.1% of the judgment resources, with representative expressions such as "responsibility" and "determination". This indicates that news discourse writers seldom judge the "the Belt and Road Initiative" from the perspective of law and morality. Instead, they focus more on the dimensions of capability and reliability, highlighting China's remarkable abilities and level of dependability in promoting a community of shared future characterized by political trust, economic integration, and cultural inclusiveness.

**Table 3.** Distribution of Judgment Resources

The Judgment System		Times	Percentage
Social evaluation	Normality	1098	17.9%
	Capability	1840	30.1%
	Reliability	1351	22.1%
Social constraints	Honesty	808	13.2%
	Legitimacy	1025	16.7%
Total		6122	100%

Example 3: Xian said the Ministry of Commerce ... facilitate the development of major projects related to the Belt and Road Initiative.

Example 4: "... we feel the Chinese government's determination and power of action to promote continuous improvement in the business environment ...," said Anna Pawlak-Kuliga, CEO and president of IKEA China.

In Example 3, the word "facilitate" belongs to the category of capability. Despite the rampant outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, China has been strengthening its cooperation with international organizations and facilitating the development of major projects related to the Belt and Road Initiative, reflecting China's determination to deepen its opening-up and international cooperation. In Example 4, the word "determination" belongs to the category of reliability. The author of the report utilizes a "borrowed voice" approach, showcasing China's action in promoting global improvement and creating market opportunities during the years of implementing "the Belt and Road Initiative". China is seen as a practitioner of multilateralism, providing an important platform for international cooperation.

#### 4.3. Characteristics of Appreciation Resources Distribution

The appreciation system reflects the appreciation of characters or events by language users from three dimensions: reaction, composition, and valuation. In political discourse, reporters evaluate national policies, activities, and development, which helps them establish a positive or negative image. Reaction indicates whether a character or event can capture our attention. Composition represents the balance and intricacy of a character or event, enabling us to focus on the subtle aspects of its development process. Valuation is related to the societal value of language, allowing us to deeply evaluate things from a long-term perspective.

According to Table 4, among the 5357 appreciation

resources, the proportion of composition and valuation is relatively high. This indicates that in the discourse of political news related to "the Belt and Road Initiative", reporters tend to provide more extensive and profound evaluations of characters or events from both micro and macro perspectives. They aim to present the content of the news events in a more specific and objective manner, helping readers understand the positive contributions and long-term impact of "the Belt and Road Initiative" on the international community.

**Table 4.** Distribution of Appreciation Resources

The Appreciation System	Times	Percentage
Reaction	1334	24.9%
Composition	2084	38.9%
Valuation	1939	36.2%
Total	5357	100%

Example 5: China has also made vigorous efforts to advance South-South cooperation, align the Belt and Road Initiative with the agenda and contribute energetically to the worldwide achievements of the sustainable development goals.

Example 6: Therefore, implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative is of great significance to the development of Yinchuan, said Xu, ...

In Example 5, the word "sustainable" belongs to the category of composition. China will vigorously promote South-South cooperation and ensure that the Belt and Road Initiative is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. News reporters use appreciation resources to demonstrate China's consistent positive goals with the rest of the world, portraying a positive image of China. In Example 6, the word "significance" belongs to the category of valuation. As an important part of the ancient Silk Road, Yinchuan is the permanent host of the China-Arab States Expo. Therefore, the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative can fully leverage Yinchuan's advantages. This further demonstrates China's foresight and visionary approach in promoting this initiative through the use of appreciation resources.

## 5. Conclusion

This study adopts the attitude system of Martin's appraisal theory as the theoretical framework. A total of 5776 news reports related to the Belt and Road Initiative published on the China Daily website from September 2013 to December 2022 were selected as the research corpus. By utilizing the AntConc corpus retrieval and analysis software, it was found that the authors of the news reports extensively employ positive attitude resources in their coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative. Overall, the findings indicate a characteristic pattern of "judgment resources > appreciation resources > affect resources." It demonstrates that news discourse authors tend to maintain an objective stance and reduce subjective opinions when describing the development and impact of the Belt and Road Initiative. They present a positive image of the initiative, highlighting its smooth progress, benefits to multiple countries, and recognition from various parties. The attitude resources help construct a national image of China as a country that cares about global development, actively assists and drives other nations to achieve mutual benefits, and promotes win-win cooperation. Among the attitude system,

the affect system contains a number of resources related to in/security and dis/satisfaction, which indicates that China's image of mutual assistance, cooperation, and win-win outcomes has received numerous praises. The judgment system consists of many resources related to capability and reliability, showcasing China's remarkable abilities and reliability in promoting the construction of a community with shared future through political trust, economic integration, and cultural inclusiveness. In the appreciation system, composition and valuation account for a relatively higher proportion, demonstrating China's positive role in promoting economic growth, initiating new forms of regional cooperation, and achieving global balance.

This study applies the attitude system in appraisal theory to political news discourse, which helps news media better use the attitude system to construct national image, and also helps readers better understand the national image construction and interpersonal meaning expression in news discourse.

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