

Appraisal Language in Football Commentary: Evidence from the Match Portugal Versus Spain FIFA World Cup 2018

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Abstract: This study explores the use of evaluative language in football commentary through the analytical framework of Appraisal Theory within Systemic Functional Linguistics. The research examines English live commentary from a match between the Portugal national football team and the Spain national football team during the 2018 FIFA World Cup. The aim of the study is to investigate how commentators employ appraisal resources to construct evaluation, convey emotions, and engage audiences in the dynamic context of live sports broadcasting. Using a qualitative discourse-analytic approach supported by systematic coding, the study identifies the major appraisal strategies employed in the commentary. The analysis reveals that evaluative language plays a central role in shaping the discourse of football commentary. Commentators frequently use linguistic resources to express emotional reactions to match events, evaluate player performance and behavior, and highlight the significance of key moments in the game. In addition, the commentary demonstrates how speakers position their voices in relation to alternative viewpoints while intensifying the dramatic effect of match narration. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of appraisal resources in constructing excitement, evaluation, and audience engagement in sports commentary discourse. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of evaluative language in media communication and offers insights for future research on sports discourse from a functional linguistic perspective.

Keywords: Appraisal theory, football commentary, evaluative language, systemic functional linguistics, sports discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Live football commentary is a dynamic communicative genre characterized not only by real-time description but also by intense evaluative positioning. Commentators play a dual role: they report unfolding events and simultaneously shape audience perception through emotionally and interpersonally loaded language. From a discourse-analytic perspective, this makes sports broadcasting an especially productive site for investigating evaluative meaning.

Appraisal Theory, developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics, offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how speakers encode stance, emotion, and intensity in discourse. The framework proposes three major subsystems—Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation—which together account for how interpersonal meaning is constructed linguistically. Previous research has demonstrated the usefulness of appraisal analysis in domains such as news discourse, academic writing, and political speech. However, live sports commentary remains comparatively underexplored, particularly in high-stakes matches.

The World Cup provides an ideal context for such investigation due to its emotional intensity and global audience. The Portugal national football team and the Spain national football team during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, widely regarded as one of the most dramatic in tournament history,

generated highly expressive commentary. This study therefore aims to examine how appraisal resources are deployed in this match, with the objective of illustrating the linguistic mechanisms through which commentators construct excitement, evaluation, and audience alignment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rooted in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, Appraisal Theory (1994) was further developed by Martin (2000) and later elaborated by Martin and White (2005). The theory aims to investigate the evaluative function of language, particularly the semantic resources that speakers and writers employ to express emotions, judgments, and evaluations. It also examines the linguistic means used to amplify these evaluations and negotiate them with others in discourse.

Appraisal serves as an umbrella framework comprising three major subsystems: Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement. The Attitude system encompasses linguistic resources used to convey feelings, judgments of behavior, and aesthetic evaluations. In contrast, Graduation and Engagement function to modify and negotiate these attitudinal meanings by adjusting their intensity and acknowledging alternative viewpoints.

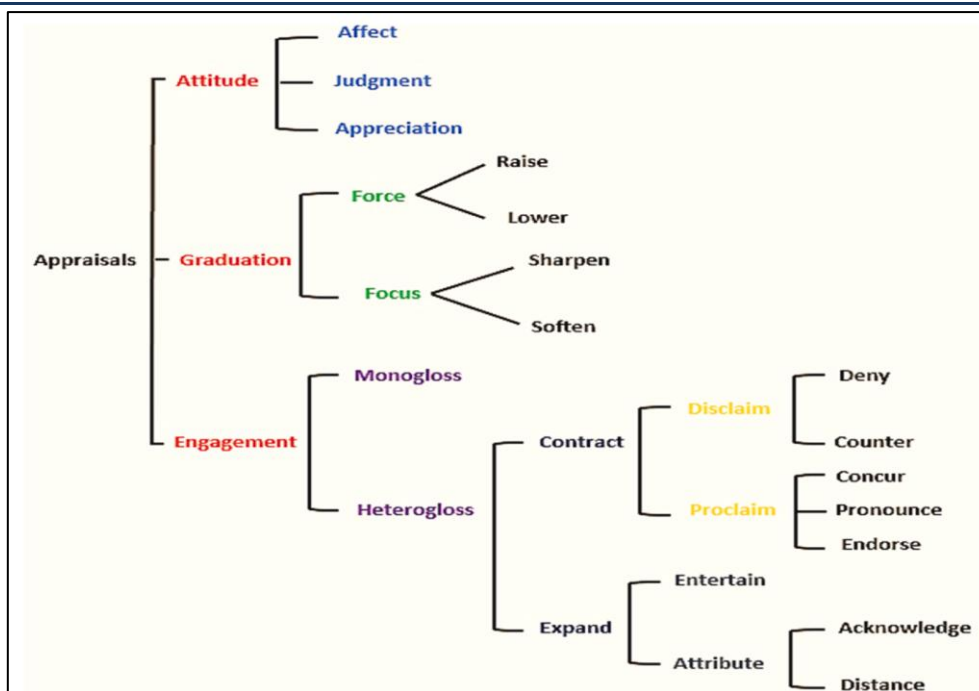


Figure 1: Outline of the appraisal theory (Hashemi & Mahdavi-rad, 2023)

Within communicative contexts, Appraisal Theory focuses on the linguistic mechanisms through which speakers and writers articulate their viewpoints toward events and simultaneously respond to or position themselves in relation to the attitudes of others. It therefore involves a range of interpersonal resources that enable individuals to express values, emotions, and degrees of commitment to particular propositions. As noted by White, the theory emphasizes interpersonal meaning both at the level of individual utterances and across the unfolding of the entire text.

Appraisal Theory provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining linguistic data. As an extension of Halliday’s functional approach, it builds upon earlier advances in discourse analysis while maintaining a systematic focus on how meaning is shaped by context. In particular, it aligns with the Tenor dimension of functional grammar, which concerns interpersonal relationships in communication. Importantly, Appraisal Theory conceptualizes evaluation not only as attitudinal meaning but also as propositions negotiated through Engagement and Graduation. Consequently, unlike traditional discourse analysis—which often overlooked the communicative context and the speaker’s level of involvement—Appraisal Theory gives careful attention to both the situational context and the

extent to which speakers align themselves with the viewpoints expressed in discourse.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic design. Commentary excerpts were purposively selected from English-language live broadcasts of the Portugal versus Spain FIFA World Cup 2018 final based on their evaluative density and communicative salience.

The analytical procedure involved three steps. First, relevant clauses were identified and segmented. Second, each instance of evaluative language was coded according to the Appraisal framework (Attitude, Engagement, Graduation). Third, patterns of co-occurrence and functional effects were interpreted in relation to the communicative context of live sports broadcasting. Given the illustrative aim of the study, emphasis was placed on depth of interpretation as well as quantitative frequency counts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overall Distribution of Appraisal Resources

The analysis of the football commentary data from the Portugal–Spain match in the 2018 FIFA World Cup identified a total of 280 appraisal tokens across the three subsystems of Appraisal: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Table 1 presents the distribution of these resources.

Table 1. Overall Distribution of Appraisal Resources

Appraisal System	Frequency	Percentage
Attitude	158	56%
Engagement	72	26%
Graduation	50	18%
Total	280	100%

The Results Show That Attitude Resources Dominate The Commentary Discourse, Accounting For More Than Half Of The Total Appraisal Instances. This Indicates That Football Commentators Rely Heavily On Evaluative Language To Convey Emotional Reactions, Assess Player Performance, And Interpret Match Events. Engagement And Graduation Resources Also Play Important Roles In Shaping The Commentator’s

Stance And Adjusting The Intensity Of Evaluations.

Attitude

Within the framework of Appraisal Theory, Attitude concerns linguistic resources used to express feelings, evaluate human behavior, and assess events. In the present data, 158 instances of Attitude were identified, representing 56% of the total appraisal resources.

Table 2. Distribution of Attitude Types

Attitude Type	Frequency	Percentage
Affect	52	33%
Judgement	60	38%
Appreciation	46	29%
Total	158	100%

The results demonstrate that Judgement is the most frequent type, suggesting that commentators frequently evaluate the competence, performance, and decisions of players, coaches, and referees during the match.

Affect

Affect resources are used to express emotional responses to match events. In the dataset, 52 instances of Affect were identified. For example, the expression *“What a start for Portugal”* conveys strong positive excitement following Portugal’s early goal. In contrast, the phrase *“It’s a nightmare start for Spain”* expresses negative emotion toward Spain’s early setback. Another example appears in *“Spanish fans all a little quiet,”* which indirectly reflects disappointment among supporters. These expressions demonstrate how commentators recreate the emotional atmosphere of the stadium, allowing viewers to experience the excitement and tension of the match.

Judgement

Judgement resources evaluate the competence or behavior of individuals. In the present data, 60 instances of Judgement were identified. For example, the statement *“Ronaldo does what he does best”* positively evaluates the player’s skill and ability. Similarly, the phrase *“No doubting*

Fernando’s pedigree” highlights the credibility and professional background of the coach. Conversely, the expression *“An error from David De Gea”* represents a negative judgement, attributing responsibility for conceding a goal to the Spanish goalkeeper. Such evaluations contribute to constructing narratives about player performance and responsibility within the match.

Appreciation

Appreciation resources evaluate events or situations. In the commentary data, 46 instances of Appreciation were identified. For instance, the statement *“Portugal could not have dreamt of a better beginning”* provides a highly positive evaluation of the team’s early performance. Similarly, the phrase *“This match which promised so much is delivering”* highlights the excitement and quality of the match. Finally, the description *“a game to be remembered for years to come”* emphasizes the significance of the match as an extraordinary sporting event. These evaluations contribute to framing the match as a dramatic and memorable contest.

GRADUATION

Graduation resources adjust the intensity of evaluation. In the present data, five instances of Graduation were identified.

Table 3. Graduation Types

Graduation Type	Frequency	Percentage
Force	40	80%
Focus	10	20%

Force is the dominant type of Graduation in the commentary data. For example, the phrase “*absolutely unimpeded view*” intensifies the evaluation of the referee’s perspective. Similarly, “*very much against the run of play*” amplifies the unexpected nature of Portugal’s goal. Graduation

resources therefore play an important role in enhancing the dramatic tone of sports commentary.

ENGAGEMENT

The Engagement system concerns how speakers position their statements relative to other viewpoints. In the present dataset, six instances of Engagement were identified.

Table 4. Engagement Types

Engagement Type	Frequency	Percentage
Monogloss	48	67%
Heterogloss	24	33%
Total	72	100%

Most engagement resources are monoglossic, presenting statements as factual information. Examples include “*It’s 1–0 Portugal*” and “*Cristiano Ronaldo scored a hat-trick.*” However, heteroglossic expressions also appear. For instance, the rhetorical question “*Was there ever any doubt?*” implicitly invites the audience to share the commentator’s confidence in Ronaldo’s ability. Another example is “*There are some officials who may well have been tempted,*” which acknowledges the possibility of alternative interpretations regarding the referee’s decision. These engagement strategies create a dialogic relationship between the commentator and the audience.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the use of appraisal resources in English football commentary from the Portugal–Spain match in the 2018 FIFA World Cup by applying the framework of Appraisal Theory developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics. The findings reveal that evaluative language plays a central role in shaping the communicative style of live sports commentary.

The analysis identified a total of 280 appraisal tokens distributed across the three subsystems of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Among these, Attitude emerged as the dominant resource, accounting for 56% of all instances. This indicates that commentators primarily rely on evaluative expressions to convey emotions, judge player performance, and appreciate the quality of match events. Within the Attitude subsystem, Affect and

Judgement occurred most frequently, highlighting the emotional and evaluative nature of sports narration.

Engagement resources were used less frequently but played an important role in positioning the commentator’s voice in relation to potential alternative viewpoints, often creating a dialogic relationship with the audience. Meanwhile, Graduation resources were mainly realized through Force, intensifying the dramatic effect of the commentary and emphasizing the significance of particular match moments.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that appraisal resources contribute significantly to the construction of excitement, evaluation, and audience engagement in football commentary discourse.

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