

# Analyzing attitudinal language in undergraduate thesis defenses: An appraisal theory



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**Abstract** This paper examines the realization of attitudes in undergraduate thesis defenses at the University of Muria Kudus, Indonesia, through the analysis of affect, judgment, and appreciation from both examiners and examinees. This study focuses on the appraisal features in the outline of systemic functional linguistics and transcript analysis from 12 thesis defenses. The findings describe the representation of attitudinal language use between examiners and examinees during the defense. The investigation reveals that evaluative language patterns mirror institutional hierarchies within academic institutions. Apparent differences in the frequency and character of attitudinal expressions reflect intricate rhetorical schemes from examiners and examinees. Examiners use implicit negative judgments in most utterances, but some of them then become explicit. The examiners' language represents double roles as supervisors and examiners. However, examinees use low attitudinal markers and tend to be neutral in responding to examiners' questions or statements. The different ways in which examinees and examiners deploy resources of affect, judgment, and appreciation highlight the role of language use in creating and reinforcing academic authority relations. These findings suggest that the power gap in defenses is imbalanced and that examinees face difficult situations in the oral defense itself. In conclusion, the research findings provide insight related to the evaluative language used in academic settings through the lens of appraisal study, especially with respect to attitudes. The results help gain insight into evaluative language use in academic defense settings, showing that it not only realizes but also constructs what can arguably be construed as institutional roles and power relations, both of which contribute to the scholarly understanding and pedagogical implications of academic discourse.

**Keywords:** attitudinal language, undergraduate thesis defense, appraisal theory

## 1. Introduction

In higher education in Indonesia, oral defense is the last stage of the whole study at the undergraduate level to obtain a bachelor's degree. It not only assesses unpublished research results but also assesses the communication style used by students. The sessions show not only the representation of the students' knowledge but also how they built their critical ability toward their research topics and interests. This study highlights the complex interactions between examinees and examiners during oral defense. In appraisal theory, interactions can be analyzed through attitudes in academic settings. The focus of the study particularly interprets the whole part of the thesis defenses on the basis of the transcript in which they are recorded from zoom and transcribed into written text, but there is no modification toward each utterance said by the examinees and the examiners. The study provides original data. The specific features of attitudes in appraisals are the realization of affect, judgment, and appreciation, which are used by examiners and examinees during defense.

Appraisal was proposed by Martin and White (2005) and is related to evaluative language, particularly expressions dealing with attitudes, engagement, and graduation. The domains of those three features are usually found in any form of text, both spoken and written. The attitudinal analysis provides a speaker's choice in which the attitude expressions are divided into the domains of affect, judgment, and appreciation. Affect refers to the speaker's emotional responses, which can be negative or positive, and whether it is expressed implicitly or explicitly. Judgment represents behavior related to principles that have normative characteristics and is involved in social esteem, which tends to represent the casualty or capability of the speaker, and social sanctions, which represent honesty and ethics. Appreciation is led to the analysis of evaluations of objects and phenomena related to values or qualities.

Evaluative language in academic settings is particularly important. Hood (2010) explored evaluative language in which the subject was academic writing, highlighting the writers' position in particular communities of disciplines. Another related finding of the study was provided by Swales (2004) within the context of the oral genre of academic settings in PhD defenses. The results of the study were related to the power relationships and face-saving strategies used by the examinees or students during the defense. In line with Koutsantoni's research conducted in 2006, PhD examiners often use evaluative language



implicitly rather than explicitly within questions or suggestions in which they mostly contain critics. Starfield et al. (2015) also analyzed graduate thesis defenses and focused on how examiners choose their language style in relation to the multiple roles of supervisor, moderator, and evaluator.

The application of appraisal theory in the context of academic settings has the voice of valuable sight of evaluative language. Mei and Allison (2003) reported findings from their research that explain the argumentative essay written by Singaporean university students, which particularly described that the students have difficulties in stating appreciation for the topic they use in the essays. Appraisal analysis in written academic books was also conducted by Chatterjee (2007), revealing the critical review related to the balance of negative and positive evaluations through the features of judgment, affect, and appreciation. In the Indonesian context, Emilia and Hamied (2015) investigated the appraisal analysis of undergraduate students' academic writing. They reported that students also had difficulties deploying evaluative language effectively, generally in realizing attitudes, engagement, and graduation.

In their current research, Xu and Liu (2023) identified the power that led the authority of academic settings in which they were represented through evaluation practices through judgment patterns toward the participants' expressions of assessment, especially research quality. Their current insight is in line with Lancaster (2016), Macken-Horarik and Isaac (2018), and Hood and Martin (2019).

Furthermore, the analysis of appreciation resources in the academic defense discourse reveals sophisticated strategies for negotiating academic authority and research quality, aligning with the findings of White and Thomson

In their current research, Xu and Liu (2023) discovered that academic settings were dominated by those with power. The existing patterns of judgment resource utilization are in line with the fundamental findings of a long line of work by Xu and Liu (Xu & Liu, 2023) examining academic evaluation practices: the authority exerted over evaluations stems from structural inequalities among evaluators. These earlier studies help contextualize the insights from this study on the role of academic integrity as performative and the role of evaluative language as gatekeeping (Lancaster, 2016; Hood & Martin, 2019; Macken-Horarik & Isaac, 2018).

In addition, the use of appreciation resources in academic defense discourse involves sophisticated strategies for negotiating authority and quality of research, which corroborates the findings of White and Thomson (2022), Chen and Lee (2021) and Thompson and Alba-Juez (2021) concerning the complex nature of appreciation as YA-YT. Lancaster's (2016) analysis of institutional roles as shapers of how academic judgment and evaluation are articulated is supported by observations from the study regarding systematic ends to compositional focus for examinees versus examiners.

This detailed examination of the semantics of emotion, judgment and appreciation resources in academic defense discourse yields insights into power structures, institutional hierarchies, and identity negotiations as vital characteristics of scholarly exchanges within these situational configurations. It expertly integrates and adds to the literature in this area, providing rich insights into advanced discursive practices by both junior and senior scholars.

The results of this study refer to one academic setting of higher education in Indonesia; those 12 defenses are taken from the English Education Department of the University of Muria Kudus. This is not intended to represent the overall face of Indonesian higher education. The judgment, effect and appreciation features of attitude analysis were initially meant to reveal critical evaluative language realized by Indonesian undergraduate students giving their thesis defenses and examiners conducting those thesis defenses during the collaboration of 12 of our own universities above-up tasks. This reflects how the examinees' and examiners' attitudes are related to orienting questions, statements and critics toward natural settings in an academic context. The general explanation of power and knowledge during defenses is intensely practiced through the disposition patterns implemented by both parties involved in the examination.

The research objectives are analyzing the examiner's and examinees' patterns of affect, judgment, and appreciation during undergraduate thesis defenses, examining how the attitudinal resources (affect, judgment, and appreciation) reflect the institutional power relation and hierarchies in the evaluative academic context, identifying how the examiners' and examinees' strategic choice of linguistic in navigating complex academic discourse, and contributing the understanding of evaluative language within Indonesian academic settings.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative method that aims to analyze the results of appraisals related to attitudes toward participants in the 12 undergraduate thesis defenses at the University of Muria Kudus, Indonesia. The primary theoretical framework is based on Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory. The defenses were carried out online via the Zoom platform. These were transcriptions of recordings that contained verbal exchanges between the examiners and examinees in the oral defense. Every oral defense has 1 hour: opening session, presentation session, Q&A session and closing session. Each defense comprised a solitary examinee and four examiners, two of whom were undergraduate thesis supervisors. The first supervisor also worked as the defense moderator.

All transcripts were analyzed via an intensive process that identified every spoken utterance of all examinees and examinees in every defense. The following steps were followed in the analytical process: (a) the researchers read thoroughly the 12 transcripts; (b) each utterance described by the examinees and examinees was analyzed by categorizing the attitude

realization on affect, judgment and appreciation; (c) the identified features were summarized through the percentages of attitudinal values realized by the examinees and examiners; (d) the data were categorized into negative or positive affect, judgment, and appreciation toward the examinees or examiners; (e) the researchers provided a discussion to describe or explain the results; and (f) the researchers drew a conclusion toward the outlined analysis of attitudes on the basis of an appraisal framework of affect, judgment and appreciation with further elaboration but not necessarily with a clear identification quote from Martin and White (2005) and Martin and Rose (2007).

The research was completed with institutional permission from the English Education Department of the University of Muria Kudus, Indonesia. This is to introduce the idea of how the sharing of data from private recordings and interactions between students and supervisors during undergraduate thesis defenses will continue. The data that were disclosed focused on understanding the transcripts at a deeper and more precise level of interpretability. It also seeks plausible information concerning the evaluative language used by all the examiners and examinees as the subject of the study. This research also concentrates on only verbal communication, in the form of attitudinal values or realization, used here by undergraduate thesis examiners and examinees. Another consideration with respect to the scope of this research is the limited extent to which this matter has been covered, particularly in Indonesia. Thus, when this systematic approach is applied, an attempt is made to provide an extensive examination of attitudinal values regarding evaluative language. Moreover, it also offers some contributions to our knowledge regarding the use of attitudes in the academic context in the context of appraisal theory.

### 3. Results

The following is the analysis of the 12 defenses related to the realization of attitudes in appraisals organized into the categories of affect, judgment, and appreciation of all examiners and examinees.

#### 3.1. *Affect: Emotional Responses in Academic Defense Settings*

The results from the analysis of emotional expressions revealed a significant difference between examinees and examiners in terms of their display. Compared with examinees, examiners carefully illustrate emotional engagement and provide various intensive patterns of emotional engagement. The context of undergraduate thesis defenses captured the lopsided power balance between examinees and examiners.

In the positive affect category, examinees frequently responded to statements such as "I am truly interested in this topic" or "I feel proud about the research results." In contrast, the positive affect of examiners reflects authority against the academic culture itself. That power emerged in comments such as "We liked this methodological perspective" and "Your theoretical model is of specific interest to me." This was particularly apparent in most of the defenses, especially the 9th. Twelve instances in favor of tester-positive affect are realized in expressions to express authority uses such as "We unequivocally think" and two opposite statements by the examinees about positive nexus, showing the considerate language used (ex. "I trust) and (I made an effort).

Certain facial expressions of negative affect also manifested as large differences between examiners and examinees. Negative affect was commonly operationalized as the examinees' anxiety. They frequently said things like, OK, in this part I feel a little bit nervous that I'm not sure if my answer is clear enough or no. On the other hand, people used by the examiners were mainly about criticism. Or you can see it in their statements like "We found these methodological choices troubling" and "I'm truly fearful of the limitations here."

In addition to positive and negative effects, neutral effects were also experienced by examiners and examinees. With its different objectives, the expressions were dominated by neutral effects. The neutral effects of the examiners were predominantly to portray their professional role as an undergraduate thesis presenter. This neutral affect tone can be evidenced by various samples of test takers: "I want to elaborate," and "I wish to illustrate." The examiners' neutral tone acted as a sort of authority to assess the overall defense session through phrases such as "We need to talk about this" and "Let us delve into this."

#### 3.2. *Judgment: Comparative Evaluation of Research Conductions*

The judgment category was also implemented differently between the supernatural images and the images of the examiners and examinees. The social esteem of capacity for the examinees was predominantly shown through sentences such as "I did all my best to gather all possible data" and the social esteem of tenacity using sentences such as "I truly toughly crafted the analytical framework." The phrases "We adhered to ethical guidelines" and "All sources are properly cited" used by the examinees also reflect the salient feature of social sanctions dealing with ethical guidance in undergraduate theses and defenses. In contrast, evaluative discussions were largely held by examiners on both social esteem and social sanctions. Comments like "Your analysis is actually less rigorous than you demonstrate" and "The methods section needs much greater level of detail." Disclosure of the ability to target sessions of defense evaluation. They saw tenacity assessed through a statement such as "You have made dogged attempts to collect data". In the utterance, such as the tone of the comments of the examiners toward that ethical guideline, we see modesty in this regulation: "Research ethics need stronger consideration."

The evidence provided by the examiners about this difference was through their negation of the examinees' consideration of research methodology, such as (the literature review needs systematic organization) and (Your theoretical framework requires considerable strengthening). Examinees received a far more neutral judgment because they were students who heard from their lecturers' criticisms and suggestions. The phrases employed by the participants were predominantly in utterances such as "the study adhered to common approaches" and "the strategy was carried out systematically."

### 3.3. Appreciation: Comparative evaluation of research elements

When resources of appreciation are analyzed, a unique pattern is identified in the ways in which examinees (110 utterances) and examiners (308 utterances) value aspects of this research. For example, expressions such as "This finding has important implications for the field" and "The framework offers new insights" convey research significance, which examinees often focus on. The writing framework, as indicated by phrases such as "Research design is methodically structured" and "Chapters transition smoothly,"

In contrast, examiners assess the level of theoretical depth and methodology rigor more thoroughly. These emerging patterns of valuation appear in phrases such as "This framework is not sufficiently theory driven" and "These results provide meager novelty." Compositional evaluations manifest in phrases such as "The organization of your literature review needs improvement" and "The methods do not sufficiently address objectives."

The contrast between examiners is even stronger in Text 7, who make use of as many as 13 negative, 11 neutral and only 4 positive appreciation instances accompanied by expressions such as the discussion could be more comprehensive, and these findings are very well described. Those in one text offer equally favorable assessment — "The analysis yields sound results" and "The methodology is consistent with objectives."

Analyses of attitudinal resources compare linguistic choices, illustrating how they reflect and reinforce institutional roles and power relations in texts for academic defense. Differences in both the frequency and character of attitudinal expressions show that both groups are equipped with relatively sophisticated strategies for achieving an effective balance between pragmatic or rhetorical imperatives related to the academic evaluation process on the one hand and the standards of professional discourse on the other.

## 4. Discussion

In this counteranalysis of emotions expressed in academic defenses, we find important patterns that further reveal the power hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics embedded in academic cultures. The unambiguous development of affect resources between examinees (115 times) and examiners (299 times), which is directly ruled in Martin and White's (2005) pioneering claim that emotional realization patterns in institutional contexts are not just a reflex but actually an active drive of an arrangement of forces, including ranks, functions, etc. Hood's (2010) broad and rich findings regarding junior scholars' strategic behavior in the face of academic power dynamics seem to resonate with our results: The examinees seemed to modulate emotional expression carefully, as evidenced by their sparse use of positive affect. As Thompson and Alba-Juez (2021) noted, these expressions of enthusiasm through sentences such as "I am truly interested in this topic" and "I feel satisfied with the results of my research" are examples of strategic emotional positioning in academic writing.

This contrast is particularly striking in Text 9, where the examinees are left with only two positive feelings, "conveyed through deferential language such as 'I hope' and 'I'm grateful'". Coffin and O'Halloran (2020) describe such explicit linguistic choices as acknowledging asymmetrical distributions of power through modal regressions. Influential Emotional Expression in Examiners. The examiners displayed a broader and more authoritative range of emotional expressions, particularly evident in their use of 12 instances of positive affect with authoritative expressions such as "We strongly believe." This finding aligns with Chen and Lee (2021), who stated that senior academics often use affective resources, not only to strengthen their authority in evaluating but also to maintain hierarchical structures within the institution. This (negative) affect pattern is particularly evident in examiners' 15 instances from Text 1, which are used to position critical stances via phrases such as "We're worried about these methodological decisions," corresponding with Lancaster's (2016) work showing that evaluative language embeds academic authority.

The analysis reveals differential patterns of judgment resources within academic defense discourse that highlight the complexity by which institutionally bound power inequities inflect imperatives for evaluation. The disparity between examinees (113) and examiners (335) in the number of judgment resources deployed mirrors the large body of research showing how power asymmetries shape journeys through academic evaluation practices (Xu & Liu 2023), whereas different scholarly participants draw on judgment resources differently to express their knowledge claims about research quality, with fundamental differences undergirding those patterns. The frequent expression of social esteem (based on statements about capacity and tenacity) is commensurate with what Lancaster (2016) describes as discursive strategies characteristic of junior scholars, because in these examples too, examinees deploy statements such as "I managed to collect comprehensive data" or "I repeatedly revised the analytical framework."

These reference lists demonstrate the integrity of academia (Hood & Martin, 2019), which is an essential part of scholarly credit. The significant extent to which this performance occurs can certainly be seen in Text 6, where examinees 'preserve five neutral judgment occurrences through relatively measured statements such as "the research adhered to standard protocols" and "the methodology was systematically implemented,"' echoing Macken--Horarik and Isaac's (2018) delineation of how junior scholars adjust in the context of academic evaluation. Compared with earlier studies, which focused on social esteem and sanctions (both individually and in combination), examiners' stereotype sources more comprehensively evaluated social esteem and sanctions, with a prudence of evaluation ratio unique to the 18 negative judgment instances concerning methodological competence. The use of judgment resources by established academics to sustain disciplinary standards supports White & Thomson's (2022) findings about how sociocultural institutions exert power through individual case judgments at the personal level. The language of my examiners is characterized by the use of phrases such as 'the literature review lacks a more systematic overview' and 'Your theory just needs massive strengthening', which are consistent with gatekeeping functions in academic discourse for evaluative language (Martin & Zappavigna, 2024).

In the academic defense discourse, the use of appreciation resources highlights negotiation patterns for authority and the quality of research information sources showcasing sophisticated evaluative strategies. This differential use of appreciation resources between examinees (110 instances) and examiners (308 instances) is in accordance with the broader findings of White and Thomson (2022), who argue that how evaluative language functioning at the level of discourse organization is directional as a consequence of the institutional role. The frequent use among examinees of research importance demonstrated in phrases such as "This finding makes a significant contribution to the field" and compositional focus revealed through claims about systematic structure suggests a think-aloud discourse strategy. According to Chen and Lee (2021), this is characteristic of junior scholars. This pattern is further reflected in the way they frame claims regarding research significance and systematic organization (Figure 10), patterns that align with Thompson and Alba-Juez's (2021) inferences regarding how early career scholars consider academic power structures as they orient their work.

The fact that the examiners used more extensive assessment criteria illustrating theoretical depth and methodological value, as we see in Text 7, where they posted 13 negative, 11 neutral and 4 positive instances of appreciation, supports Martin and Zappavigna (2024), who claim that established academics use resources of appreciation to secure disciplinary standards. Their valence patterns manifest in phrases such as "This framework does not have enough theoretical basis" and "These results provide little novelty," which resonates with Hood's (2010) analysis of evaluative language constituting authority among academic peers. The juxtaposition between examiners' criticisms and examinees' balanced appreciation as in "The analysis yields solid results" vs. 'The methodology is consistent with aims' demonstrates a glimpse of contrasting elements, as described by Coffin and O'Halloran (2020), regarding complex negotiations of academic identity and authority within scholarly discourse.

In addition, the systematic differences still reflect how institutional position affects the role of academic judgment and evaluation in written performance, which is especially apparent from Text 7's diverse appreciation patterns (Lancaster, 2016). The use of phrases, from 'the discussion is not fully developed' to 'impressionistically detailed in these findings,' used by the examiners, is a perfect illustration of what Macken-Horarik and Isaac (2018) conceptualized as the complex positive-negative appreciation dynamic taking place in academic evaluation contexts.

## 5. Conclusions

Undergraduate thesis defense discourse is seen as exhibiting sophisticated ways of making linguistic choices that reflect and sustain large social processes but also reproduce hierarchies in institutional life, formalized relationships among communities of students and their teachers (and researchers), and relationships between different types of knowledge with various degrees of power. The different ways in which examinees and examiners deploy resources of affect, judgment, and appreciation highlight the role of language use in creating and reinforcing academic authority relations. The authors of the examination tend to use soft emotional expressions and mild assessments, which is consistent with their status as juniors in the academy. They convey importance and systematicity in their wording and use neutral affect to remain professional. In contrast, examiners show more diverse and authoritative patterns of emotional engagement, encompassing evaluation outputs across both social esteem and sanctions and examining greater breadth within dimensions of theoretical depth and methodological rigor. The patterns that emerge are striking and clearly highlight the ways in which both parties demonstrate advancement use of high-level strategies, successfully operating within competing demands of academic review versus the expectation for civil discourse. The results help gain insight into evaluative language use in academic defense settings, showing that it not only realizes but also constructs what can arguably be construed as institutional roles and power relations, both of which contribute to the scholarly understanding and pedagogical implications of academic discourse.

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### Ethical considerations

This research followed the ethical guidelines of human participants, and it was approved by the Dean of Teacher Training and Education Faculty of Universitas Muria Kudus. In collecting the data, the examiners and examinees know that they become participants in the research. The recordings and transcripts are secured, and only researchers can access the original data resources. The participants are also anonymous in the research results.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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