

## Original Paper

# A Positive Discourse Analysis of News Discourses on South African University Official Websites from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

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### **Abstract**

*This study, framed by the attitude subsystem of Appraisal Theory, focuses on English news discourses from the official websites of five representative South African universities (University of Cape Town, University of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University, University of Pretoria, and University of Johannesburg). Through a positive discourse analysis of the sample texts, it explores the characteristics of their discourse strategies and the international image constructed. The study finds that among the distribution of attitudinal resources, appreciation resources account for the highest proportion (63.19%), significantly higher than affect resources (22.53%) and judgement resources (13.19%). Specific linguistic practices show that South African universities adopt a core positive discourse strategy centered on solving social problems, emphasizing inclusivity of marginalized groups and the people-oriented value of technological innovation to highlight micro-practical value and a focus on fairness and justice. This discourse construction is closely linked to reflections on colonial legacies and post-independence development needs. It not only breaks the stereotype of African universities as mere knowledge recipients but also shapes a three-in-one international image: local-rooted solvers of social problems, practical knowledge producers serving the academic community, and inclusive global participants. This provides empirical evidence at the discourse level for understanding the dialectical relationship between localization and internationalization of African higher education.*

### **Keywords**

*English official websites of South African universities, news discourses, Appraisal Theory, positive discourse analysis, international image construction*

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary context of intertwined globalization and localization, institutions of higher education are not only core venues for knowledge production and talent cultivation but also important carriers of national and regional development strategies. The self-image and value propositions they construct through discursive practices profoundly reflect educational philosophies and development paths under different social and cultural backgrounds. South African universities, amid the dual context of colonial legacies and post-independence development, have always taken responding to local social needs and promoting fairness and justice as core goals, forming a unique development path rooted in communities and empowering people's livelihoods.

Against this backdrop, research on the discursive practices of South African universities holds significant theoretical and practical significance. This study focuses on news discourses from five representative African universities (University of Cape Town, University of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University, University of Pretoria, and University of Johannesburg). Using the attitude system within Appraisal Theory as an analytical tool, it explores the characteristics of positive discourse strategies employed by South African higher education institutions. By deconstructing how African universities construct positive images through affect, judgement, and appreciation resources within the attitude system—specifically, how South African universities emphasize social problem-solving and community empowerment—this research can reveal the distinctive features of their educational philosophies and social function positioning, investigate the international images constructed by African universities in news discourses, and provide a new perspective for understanding the developmental paths and unique characteristics of African higher education.

## 2. Literature Review

In recent years, South African higher education has increasingly demonstrated unique vitality in its own development and international cooperation. South African universities play an important role in solving local social problems and promoting community development. The image-building of South African universities is rooted in complex historical contexts and contemporary transformation pressures, showing characteristics of multiple tensions and dynamic reconstruction. The apartheid system profoundly shaped the initial image of universities: early institutions such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Stellenbosch University (SU) mostly served white elites, while others like the University of the Western Cape (UWC) emerged as products of apartheid education, functioning to restrict the development of non-white groups. This racial stratification has become a historical burden for image reconstruction. In the post-apartheid era, South African universities face the tension of dual missions. Archer (2017) notes that South African universities, on the one hand, need to continue their primary functions of teaching and research, maintaining academic excellence to integrate into the global system; on the other hand, they must undertake secondary functions, responding to transformation needs by redressing historical inequalities and promoting social justice. This tension makes the university image constantly oscillate

between academic institutions and social tools. To adapt to new social and global contexts, South African universities actively reshape their images through symbolic reconstruction and branding strategies. Mafofo and Banda's (2014) multimodal analysis shows that different types of universities convey differentiated positioning through visual and linguistic symbols. However, image-building still faces deep-seated contradictions. On one hand, Swartz et al. (2018) find that elite research universities (such as UCT) need to emphasize research output and international reputation in global ranking competitions, which may downplay their social service role. On the other hand, Kruss and Visser (2017) reveal that historically disadvantaged universities (such as rural universities), despite their commitment to community development, struggle to break through their marginalized image due to insufficient resources and reputation. Additionally, implicit racial and class stratification persists. Soudien (2015) shows that although universities claim deracialization, racial disparities in enrollment and graduation rates, as well as the Western-centric nature of curriculum content, still expose a gap between image and reality. In summary, research on the image of South African universities has made some progress, but specialized studies on the English official websites of South African universities are relatively scarce. Meanwhile, relevant studies have not sufficiently focused on the discourse strategies constructed by South African universities through English official website news discourses and their underlying meanings, limiting our in-depth understanding of the development characteristics of South African higher education. In view of this, this study intends to analyze the positive discourse strategies used in news discourses on South African universities' English official websites using the attitude subsystem of Appraisal Theory through data analysis methods to fill this research gap. It mainly addresses two questions:

- (1) What overall positive discourse strategies are used in the news discourses on South African universities' English official websites?
- (2) What international image do the positive discourse strategies used by South African universities in news discourses highlight?

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Appraisal Theory, developed by linguists such as Martin & White in the 1990s on the basis of systemic functional linguistics, is an effective theoretical framework in discourse analysis. Martin and White (2005) divide the appraisal system into three subsystems: engagement, attitude, and graduation; among them, the attitude subsystem can be further subdivided into affect, judgement, and appreciation. Affect concerns the positive or negative emotional responses held by the speaker towards things; judgement focuses on ethical evaluation of behaviors, covering two dimensions: social esteem and social sanction; appreciation evaluates the aesthetic and functional value of phenomena or things, including three aspects: reaction, composition, and valuation. Martin proposed positive discourse analysis (PDA) in 1999, an emerging branch of discourse analysis that has attracted attention from scholars at home and abroad in recent years. It aims to complement critical discourse analysis (CDA) by constructing positive social realities through language. Scholars have applied it to fields such as news, political speeches, and social movements, e.g.,

Macgilchrist (2007) analyzed its application in media discourses. Studies often combine corpus tools (such as Wordsmith, AntConc) with qualitative analysis, e.g., Salahshour (2016) revealed positive aspects in immigrant discourses through corpus analysis.

Since Appraisal Theory and PDA were introduced to China in the early 21st century, domestic scholars have carried out preliminary research and applications. Wang Zhenhua (2001) took the lead in introducing the background and mechanism of Appraisal Theory, and Zhu Yongsheng (2006) further explored the scope and methods of PDA, laying the foundation for its development. Domestic scholars have applied PDA to fields such as news, politics, and culture, e.g., Qian Jianwei and Rob Law (2016) analyzed the positive construction of Chinese tourists' images by Western media, and Dong Dan (2019) conducted a positive discourse analysis of Italian mainstream media's reports on the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China using Appraisal Theory, demonstrating its potential in international report analysis. Studies often combine corpus tools (such as UAM Corpus Tool, AntConc) with qualitative analysis to enhance objectivity and depth. Meanwhile, the separate use of subsystems of Appraisal Theory has gradually emerged in domestic research: Xu Lulu et al. (2025) introduced the engagement subsystem into the analysis of Chinese and American media reports on the "Belt and Road Initiative." Overall, Appraisal Theory and its application in positive discourse analysis have achieved results both domestically and internationally. Foreign studies focus on theoretical origins and expanding new perspectives, with wide application in multiple fields; domestic studies combine local culture and needs, conduct in-depth practice, and innovate theories. In the future, with the continuous development of Appraisal Theory and positive discourse analysis, their application prospects in linguistic research will be broader. PDA will also play a greater role in interdisciplinary, multimodal discourse analysis, and social transformation, helping to build a harmonious and positive social environment.

## **4. Methodology**

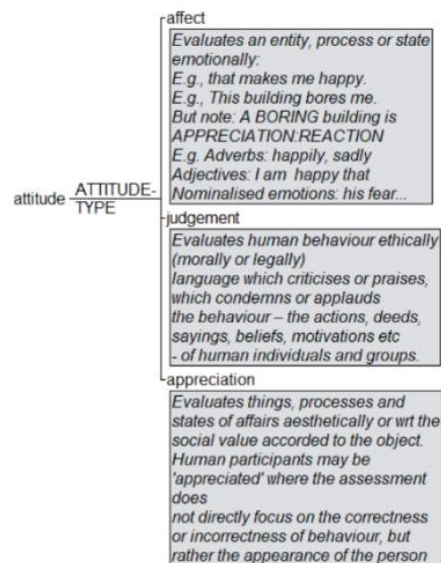
### *4.1 Corpus Selection*

This study selects news discourses from the English official websites of the top five South African universities in the 2025 QS World University Rankings (University of Cape Town, University of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University, University of Pretoria, and University of Johannesburg). For each university, up to 20 latest news articles are selected and downloaded in full, with news dates ranging from early March to mid-to-late April. Invalid corpus is then excluded from the downloaded news to ensure that each university retains at least 10 news discourses. This study finally selects 50 news discourses from South African universities' English official websites to ensure the validity and representativeness of the corpus.

### *4.2 Corpus Annotation*

After corpus collection, invalid corpus is excluded to determine the final corpus for analysis. A annotation framework is established and manual annotation is conducted using the corpus annotation software UAM Corpus Tool version 3.3. This study refers to Martin & White's (2005) appraisal system to establish the

attitude system annotation framework (as shown in Figure 1). The appraisal system is constructed at the level of discourse semantics. Although clear classification criteria have been formulated, dynamic analysis combined with contextual factors is still required in actual annotation. When identifying attitudinal resources, it is necessary to thoroughly examine their semantic connotations in specific contexts to ensure comprehensive and accurate capture of all attitudinal resources in news discourses and the distribution characteristics of their subcategories.



**Figure 1. Attitude System Annotation Framework**

#### 4.3 Data Analysis

After corpus annotation, the statistical function of UAM Corpus Tool version 3.3 is used to statistically analyze the attitudinal resources in the 50 news discourses from African universities' English official websites, calculating the frequency of each type of attitudinal resource and its proportion in the total to analyze the distribution of attitudinal resources in African universities' English official website news discourses. When analyzing the structural nature of distribution, the ranking of attitudinal resource proportions is presented; when analyzing the balance of distribution patterns, the balance of attitudinal resource proportions is compared. On this basis, specific linguistic resources realizing attitudinal resources are extracted to analyze the focus of African universities' positive discourse strategies, and further explore the positive discourse strategies used by African universities in news corpus and the international image they construct.

### 5. Positive Discourse Analysis of News Discourses on South African Universities' English Official Websites

#### 5.1 Overall Distribution of Attitudinal Resources

**Table 1. Distribution of Attitude Resources in South African Universities**

Feature	N	Percent
	182	100%
Affect	41	22.53%
Judgement	24	13.19%
Appreciation	115	63.19%

As shown in the statistical data in Table 1, in the sample of news discourses from South African universities' English official websites selected in this study, appreciation resources account for the largest proportion (63.19%); affect resources come next, accounting for 22.53%; judgement resources account for 13.19%. The proportions of affect resources and judgement resources are relatively close, while appreciation resources show a significant leading advantage, indicating that African universities tend to convey positive information through evaluating things, processes, and states of affairs in news discourses. The following will specifically analyze the specific linguistic resources realizing attitudinal resources in South African universities' news discourses.

### *5.2 Analysis of Appreciation Resources in South African Universities' News Discourses*

In general terms appreciations can be divided into our 'reactions' to things (do they catch our attention; do they please us?), their 'composition' (balance and complexity), and their 'value' (how innovative, authentic, timely, etc.) (Martin & White, 2005). When analyzing appreciation in South African universities' news discourses, attention should be paid to how texts express evaluations of things' reaction, composition, and value through language, and how these evaluations affect readers' views and feelings towards South African universities. South African universities' news discourses widely use positive discourse strategies in communication. Among them, they skillfully use rhetorical devices such as metaphors and parallelism to enhance the appeal and persuasiveness of the text. At the same time, discourses construct positive semantic fields around themes such as cooperation and exchange, innovation and development, and social services, conveying universities' positive attitudes and achievements in related fields.

In terms of appreciative language, South African universities' news discourses are good at concretizing abstract concepts, making information transmission more vivid and vivid. Through this method, universities can more effectively demonstrate their positive impact in social services, educational innovation, and scientific research achievements, enhancing readers' resonance and recognition. Parallel structures are widely used in African universities' news discourses to enhance momentum and rhythm, making information transmission more powerful and persuasive. Through this method, universities can more effectively showcase their positive actions and achievements in multiple fields, enhancing readers' cognition and recognition. Parallelism conveys positive emotions and strength by enhancing momentum and rhythm, making information more powerful and persuasive. Example [1] emphasizes the multiple

positive goals of international cooperation through the parallel structure of “enhance research collaborations, student mobility, and skills development”.

**Example [1]** The visit reinforced the importance of international cooperation in higher education, paving the way for future projects that will enhance research collaborations, student mobility, and skills development between Wits and Canadian institutions.

In terms of content orientation, the appreciation resources in South African universities’ news discourses focus on specific practical achievements and social value, showing the characteristics of constructing positive semantic fields around themes such as cooperation and exchange, innovation and development, and social services, conveying universities’ positive attitudes and achievements in related fields. Their positive discourse strategies strengthen universities’ social contributions and sense of responsibility through concrete narratives. Discourses adopt quantitative and comparative narratives of specific achievements to enhance persuasiveness with accurate data. Example [2] shows that the forensic pathology service program “drastically shortened the time it takes to identify unknown decedents – reducing the wait from several months to around 30 days”, intuitively demonstrating the program’s improvement in social service efficiency through a sharp contrast in the time dimension. **Example [3]** mentions that the medical innovation product “Easy Squeezy”, as a breakthrough inhaler attachment sleeve, reduces activation force by two-thirds, proving the technology’s improvement in patients’ user experience with specific proportions.

**Example [2]** This programme has drastically shortened the time it takes to identify unknown decedents – reducing the wait from several months to around 30 days.

**Example [3]** Their flagship product, the Easy Squeezy, is a breakthrough attachment sleeve that fits over standard inhalers, reducing activation force by two-thirds.

In South African universities’ news discourses, innovation and development are important themes in constructing positive semantic fields. By emphasizing technological innovation, academic innovation, and social innovation, universities demonstrate their active efforts in promoting academic progress and social development. Example [4] constructs a positive innovation semantic field through words such as “breaking down barriers” and “life-saving medical technologies”, highlighting enterprises’ active efforts in technological innovation. At the same time, discourses focus on the public nature of social value, deeply binding university actions with public interests. Example [5] directly highlights the university’s role as a social service provider; Example [6] defines the Teacher Education Program (TEP) as “a key example of how education can be a vehicle for societal transformation”, elevating classroom practice to the height of social transformation. Example [7] states that the African HIV/AIDS Management Center “has made significant contributions to tackling one of the greatest public health challenges of our time during more than two decades of its existence”, clearly linking academic research with global public health needs.

**Example [4]** Impulse Biomedical is breaking down barriers to access life-saving medical technologies.

**Example [5]** The public service speech and audiology facility offers both face-to-face and virtual therapy sessions and is committed to advancing the public good and providing professional services to the public at a low cost.

**Example [6]** The TEP stands as a key example of how education can be a vehicle for societal transformation.

**Example [7]** The center's significant contribution to tackling one of the greatest public health challenges of our time during the more than two decades of its existence.

### *5.3 Analysis of Affect Resources in South African Universities' News Discourses*

Affect is concerned with registering positive and negative feelings: do we feel happy or sad, confident or anxious, interested or bored? (Martin & White, 2005). The affect resources in South African universities' news discourses focus on positive resonance among multiple subjects, connecting individuals and groups through emotional expression, showing characteristics of positive emotion dominance, emotion-identity binding, and emotion-driven action. Their positive discourse strategies aim to strengthen community cohesion and willingness to act through emotional resonance.

In emotional expression, discourses focus on the concrete expression of positive emotions, conveying real feelings through specific scenarios. Example [8] conveys the belief that "effort is rewarding" through an individual's pride and excitement; Example [9] uses "pride" to dispel self-doubt and strengthen self-identity; Example [10] transforms personal achievements into family-shared glory through the detailed emotions of family members.

**Example [8]** Hailing from East London in the Eastern Cape, Emyoli Sokoni feels proud of her determination. Sokoni, studying towards a BCom in Actuarial Science, says she is thrilled to be among the top achievers.

**Example [9]** From Point High School in Mossel Bay, Gratia Pauw, studying towards a BSc in Applied Medicinal Chemistry, admitted to feeling a bit of imposter syndrome but is ultimately proud of herself.

**Example [10]** Her brother, Xolani, beamed with pride as he held her gown and flowers. Their mother, Ntombifuthi, could hardly contain her joy. Her father, Joos, was particularly proud, having encouraged her to study Law.

In terms of content orientation, discourses strengthen collective belonging through community construction of emotional resonance. Affect resources are strategically used in South African universities' news as a combination of hope, community, and politics, rather than simple emotional venting. First, discourses adopt a strategy of amplifying hope to transform positive emotions into mobilization resources for the future. In Example [11], "expressed hope" transforms emotional evaluation into social mobilization. Second, discourses also adopt a strategy of sharing care to expand personal emotions into community emotions. In Example [12], "pleased" and "home away from home" elevate personal comfort to a sense of group belonging. Example [13] overlays the university's emotions with field symbolism through "great pride". The university is not only the host of the event but also a container of national glory. By making the principal an emotional spokesperson, the report spreads institutional pride into



public interest emotions, strengthening the imagination of an emotional community between the university and the country. Overall, through frameworks of hope and community, affect resources reshape emotional expression into a catalyst for social solidarity and policy appeals, injecting warmth and moral strength into university narratives.

**Example [11]** Despite the challenges, Nowrojee expressed hope in the next generation.

**Example [12]** Ramjugernath said he was also pleased that the students had chosen the University as their home away from home.

**Example [13]** Principal Professor Letlhokwa Mpedi stated that it was a source of great pride that the event was held at the University.

#### *5.4 Analysis of Judgement Resources in South African Universities' News Discourses*

With judgement we move into the region of meaning construing our attitudes to people and the way they behave - their character (how they measure up). In general terms judgements can be divided into those dealing with 'social esteem' and those oriented to 'social sanction' (Martin & White, 2005). The judgement resources in South African universities' news discourses focus on value guidance and action orientation, showing characteristics of character-driven value judgment, dialectical unity of problems and hope, and action-oriented evaluation logic through dialectical evaluation of characters and phenomena. Their positive discourse strategies focus on transforming critical reflection into constructive strength. At the same time, the judgement resources in South African universities' news discourses first appear in a "de-individual heroization" manner. They are not satisfied with eulogizing principals, scholars, or students as lone heroes, but through positive discourse strategies, reconstruct personal virtues into collective resilience and public responsibility.

In role model shaping, discourses adopt value reinforcement through role model narratives, extracting group-emulable values through the practices of outstanding individuals. Example [14] elevates personal actions to collective values promoting social progress; its judgment of inspiration is not only affirmation of the individual but also constructs the spiritual inheritance of educational equity. Example [15] uses the judgment verb "embodies" to concretize the abstract concept of "inclusivity" into perceivable practical standards, providing a reference for university governance. Example [16] uses the word "testament" to transform individual experience into a spiritual symbol of "lifelong dedication", and its judgment of "unwavering service" further strengthens the concept of "symbiosis between personal value and social value".

**Example [14]** Prof Jakes Gerwel was one of those leaders who, during the darkest days of Apartheid, inspired us – whether we were students at the University of the Western Cape or beyond – to fight for a better education.

**Example [15]** In her leadership, she embodies a commitment to decolonial scholarship, community-centred methodologies, and the pursuit of a truly inclusive university.

**Example [16]** The life of UJ honorary doctorate recipient, Sister Abegail Ntleko, is a testament to resilience, compassion, and unwavering service.

In responsibility diffusion, discourses are good at externalizing leaders' personal virtues into the public functions of university systems. Example [17] evaluates the leader's personal trait as a "wily negotiator" but quickly shifts focus to the result "keep the university together". The focus of judgment shifts from the personal virtue of "shrewdness" to the institutional function of maintaining the whole. In Example [18], "tenaciously" originally praises willpower, but the phrase "our right to protest" at the end shifts the evaluation object from personal will to students' collective democratic rights. The sentence transforms the leader's personal behavior into an institutional commitment through "negotiator" and "defended" i.e., the university is a fuse for the right to protest, not a tool for suppression. Personal virtues are elevated to the status of rights here, realizing the secondary diffusion of responsibility to systems and communities.

**Example [17]** He was a wily negotiator who managed to keep the university together – contradictions and all.

**Example [18]** He tenaciously defended our right to protest.

## 6. Results and Discussion

Based on the attitude subsystem of Appraisal Theory, this study conducts a positive discourse analysis of 50 news discourses from the English official websites of five South African universities. The results show that South African universities' positive discourse strategies are centered on solving social problems, specifically manifested as follows: Appreciation resources focus on micro-practical value and fairness and justice orientation, constructing a practical image of academic service to the community by emphasizing inclusivity of marginalized groups and the people-oriented value of technological innovation; Affect resources strengthen collective identity through the connection between concrete individual emotions and community emotions, shaping the university as a warm community, reflecting the university's inclusiveness and cultural diversity; Judgement resources focus on de-individual heroization collective value evaluation, highlighting the university's leading role in social transformation through ethical affirmation of individual behaviors.

Through the above positive discourse strategies, South African universities construct a hierarchically clear international image in news discourses on their English official websites. First, they are local-rooted solvers of social problems. News discourses extensively present universities' practical actions in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, medical resource shortage, and educational inequality, breaking the stereotype that African universities are mere knowledge recipients and demonstrating a pragmatic trait of not avoiding social contradictions and taking the initiative to assume local responsibilities. Second, they are practical knowledge producers serving the academic community. Unlike traditional universities that emphasize academic excellence in narratives, South African universities focus more on the application value and social impact of knowledge, such as focusing international cooperation on skill development and anchoring technological innovation in people's livelihood needs, echoing the concept of localization and endogenous development of African higher education. Finally, they are global participants with both inclusiveness and cultural awareness. Discourses not only show inclusiveness

towards international students and cooperative institutions but also emphasize adherence to local culture and social justice, providing discourse support for breaking the marginal status in the global scientific research network.

This image construction and selection of discourse strategies deeply reflect South African higher education's exploration of paths amid colonial legacies and post-independence development. On one hand, by emphasizing community empowerment and fairness and justice, universities actively cut off from the elitist and externalized educational model during the colonial period, promoting decolonization practices; on the other hand, facing the current situation of economic backwardness and social inequality, taking solving specific problems as the core logic is a pragmatic response to limited resources and urgent needs; at the same time, highlighting local value and practical ability in global competition helps form differentiated international competitiveness and construct a unique identity.

## 7. Conclusion

This study, framed by the attitude subsystem of Appraisal Theory, focuses on news discourses from the English official websites of five South African universities, and in-depth analyzes the positive discourse strategies and the constructed international image. The study finds that among attitudinal resources, appreciation resources account for a significantly higher proportion (63.19%) than affect resources (22.53%) and judgement resources (13.19%), indicating that South African universities tend to convey positive information through evaluating the value of things, processes, or states of affairs. Their core positive discourse strategies are centered on solving social problems, shaping a multi-dimensional international image by highlighting responsiveness to local social pain points, inclusivity of marginalized groups, and the people-oriented value of technological innovation. Specifically, through news discourses, South African universities construct a three-in-one international image: local-rooted solvers of social problems, practical knowledge producers serving the academic community, and global participants with both inclusiveness and cultural awareness. This research result enriches the application of Appraisal Theory in higher education discourse analysis, reveals the path of African universities' decolonization and identity reconstruction through discursive practices, and provides a cross-cultural reference for the international image communication of global higher education institutions. Future research can further expand the sample scope to include more universities in African countries, and combine multimodal discourse analysis (such as official website images, videos, etc.) to more comprehensively explore the three-dimensional construction mechanism of African universities' international image.

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