

Attitude Analysis in Taylor Swift's Commencement Speech at New York

University 2022

Nur Mufidah, Widhiyanto, Zulfa Sakhiyya

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Email: mufidahnur@students.unnes.ac.id, pakwidhi_english@mail.unnes.ac.id,
zulfa.sakhiyya@mail.unnes.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Attitude, as part of the Appraisal framework proposed by Martin and White (2005), is realized in Taylor Swift's 2022 commencement speech at New York University. Through a qualitative descriptive approach, this research explores how the speaker uses evaluative language to construct interpersonal meaning and engage the audience. The focus is on the three sub-types of Attitude that are Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation, which correspond to expressions of emotion, evaluations of behavior, and assessments of phenomena, respectively. A total of 266 clauses from the speech were analyzed, with 172 identified as containing Attitude expressions. The findings show that positive Attitude overwhelmingly dominates the speech, especially through Affect, reflecting Swift's strategy to foster empathy, motivation, and solidarity. Judgment is often used to present personal growth and moral insight, while Appreciation is employed to frame life experiences as meaningful. This study contributes to discourse analysis by highlighting how a non-traditional speaker like Taylor Swift constructs educational meaning through personal storytelling. It also demonstrates how celebrity speeches can fulfill the interpersonal and inspirational goals of academic ceremonies, offering a valuable case for Appraisal-based analysis in popular and educational discourse.

KEYWORDS Appraisal Theory, Attitude, Taylor Swift, commencement speech, evaluative language, discourse analysis



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International

INTRODUCTION

Commencement speeches mark a significant moment in academic life, often filled with expressions of gratitude, inspiration, and encouragement (Elfahmi, Woerdenbag, & Kayser, 2014). While traditionally delivered by scholars, university presidents, or political figures, recent years have seen a growing trend of celebrities and public figures—especially artists, authors, and entertainers—being invited to deliver these addresses (Dewi & Hakim, 2021; Permana & Safitri, 2024; Satria, Wulandari, & Nugroho, 2023). One such example is Taylor Swift's commencement speech at New York University (NYU) in 2022. Taylor Swift is not a conventional academic speaker. As a globally recognized singer-songwriter, her public persona is shaped more by creativity, emotional narrative, and popular influence than by institutional authority. However, her role as a storyteller, cultural icon, and advocate for personal growth has positioned her as a unique voice in contemporary discourse (Nurcholis, Priosoeryanto,

Purwakusumah, Katayama, & Suzuki, 2018). Her commencement speech blended humor, vulnerability, and motivational insight, making it a rich subject for linguistic and rhetorical analysis. This study aims to analyze how Taylor Swift's speech constructs interpersonal meaning using the Attitude subsystem of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005).

Attitude encompasses the linguistic resources used to express emotion (*Affect*), evaluate behavior (*Judgment*), and assess experiences or things (*Appreciation*) (Kusuma & Sari, 2022). These expressions play a vital role in shaping how the speaker relates to the audience and builds rhetorical credibility. By investigating Swift's use of Attitude, this study not only sheds light on her rhetorical strategies but also contributes to a growing body of research that examines how non-traditional speakers engage with educational genres. The unique blend of formal academic context and informal, emotionally charged language in her speech provides a compelling case for applying Appraisal Theory in contemporary, hybrid discourse genres (Ainurofiq et al., 2023).

Appraisal Theory, introduced by Martin and White (2005), offers a comprehensive framework to analyze how language constructs interpersonal meaning through evaluation. At its core is the Attitude system, which comprises three interrelated components: *Affect* (emotional response), *Judgment* (moral and social evaluation of behavior), and *Appreciation* (evaluation of things, events, or phenomena). This system enables researchers to examine how speakers position themselves and their audience in relation to shared feelings, values, and beliefs (Putri & Sari, 2022). A considerable body of research has applied Attitude analysis to political and ceremonial speeches, where speakers often blend *Affect* and *Judgment* to build credibility and inspire solidarity. Huynh and Bui (2018), for example, found that Hillary Clinton's concession speech combined warmth and dignity by balancing positive *Affect* with moral *Judgment*. Similarly, Alhabib (2020) identified hopeful and inclusive Attitude expressions in Barack Obama's inaugural speech, in line with Martin and White's principle of interpersonal solidarity. Studies by Gisty Liani (2019) and Suhaila (2019) on President Jokowi's speeches emphasized the strategic use of *Appreciation* and *Judgment* to promote national development and unity.

Meanwhile, Rahmaida and Cahyono (2022) contrasted Donald Trump's and Joe Biden's rhetorical styles, noting Biden's consistent use of positive Attitude in contrast to Trump's more ideologically divisive tone. In the field of media and journalistic discourse, researchers have observed that news articles often use invoked *Affect* and implicit *Judgment*, even under the guise of objectivity. Puspita and Pranoto (2021) and Shang & Jia (2021) demonstrated that news coverage of crises subtly influences readers' emotional reactions and judgments. Jakaza (2013) and Auman (2014) highlighted ideological positioning in Zimbabwean and European media, often conveyed through *Graduation* and *Engagement*. In other multimodal texts, such as advertisements or textbooks, Teo and Zhu (2018) explored how visual and verbal appraisal work together to promote affective education. Appraisal Theory has also proven valuable in academic and educational contexts. Wang (2017) and Liu (2013) found that students'

argumentative essays typically relied on *Appreciation* to assess ideas, while Mori (2017) noted that weak use of *Engagement* reduced argumentative clarity. Geng (2015) and Fitriati et al. (2018) demonstrated that Appraisal-based training enhances students' awareness of authorial stance and evaluative variation. Beyond formal genres, studies have applied Appraisal to songs, literary texts, and spoken performances. Yuningsih (2018) examined dominant negative *Affect* in song lyrics, while Atael (2019) traced emotional insecurity in fiction. In debates, Mardiana (2018) found that students relied on *Appreciation* and intensified *Graduation* to persuade judges and opponents.

Despite this broad application, there remains limited research on celebrity speeches in educational settings—especially from non-academic figures like Taylor Swift (Handayani & Nurmalasari, 2020). This study fills that gap by analyzing how Swift, as a pop cultural icon, uses Attitude to construct interpersonal meaning. Her speech exemplifies a hybrid discourse: emotionally open, narrative-driven, and delivered within a formal academic genre. It offers a compelling case for exploring how celebrity ethos reshapes rhetorical expectations through the lens of Appraisal Theory (Wijaya & Kusuma, 2021).

Previous studies have examined the rhetorical strategies of commencement speeches, but gaps remain regarding the engagement of non-traditional speakers from popular culture. For instance, Poynton (2013) analyzed university commencement speeches delivered by academic authorities and highlighted the role of ethos, pathos, and logos in fostering audience connection; yet, this study focused on conventional academic speakers and did not consider celebrity influence. Similarly, Bednarek and Caple (2012) examined evaluative language in public speeches, emphasizing *Affect*, *Judgment*, and *Appreciation*, but their research largely addressed political and institutional contexts rather than culturally iconic figures in educational settings. Building on these insights, the present study critically investigates Taylor Swift's 2022 NYU commencement speech through the Attitude subsystem of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), addressing a research gap by exploring how a celebrity speaker constructs interpersonal meaning and emotional engagement in a formal academic context.

This study addresses the following research questions: How is the Attitude system (positive and negative expressions) realized in Taylor Swift's 2022 commencement speech? How does Taylor Swift construct *Affect* in the speech? How does she construct *Judgment* in the speech? How does she construct *Appreciation* in the speech?

The research aims to expand the application of Appraisal Theory to hybrid discourse genres, offering implications for discourse analysts, educators, and communicators in understanding how celebrity rhetoric can fulfill educational, motivational, and interpersonal functions.

Taylor Swift was chosen as the object of this study due to her distinctive position as a cultural figure addressing an academic audience. Her speech, though rooted in a formal educational setting, was delivered in a tone characterized by personal storytelling, emotional vulnerability, and reflective insight. This makes it particularly suitable for analysis through the

Appraisal framework, which emphasizes the interpersonal function of language. Moreover, Swift's speech resonates widely with both fans and broader audiences, making it a valuable case for examining how popular discourse can fulfill educational and motivational functions.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the intersection of discourse analysis, popular culture, and educational communication. It expands the application of Appraisal Theory to non-traditional public speeches and highlights how speakers like Taylor Swift construct interpersonal engagement through evaluative language. The findings may also be relevant for researchers, educators, and communicators interested in the rhetorical power of celebrity discourse in educational contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how Taylor Swift, as a non-academic speaker, uses evaluative language in her 2022 commencement speech at New York University (NYU) to construct interpersonal meaning and engage the audience. This approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth description of language phenomena and an understanding of the social functions of evaluative expressions in the context of a formal speech delivered by a public figure. The focus of the study is on the three subtypes of Attitude as defined in Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005): *Affect* (expressions of emotion), *Judgment* (evaluations of behavior), and *Appreciation* (assessments of phenomena or objects).

The data consist of 266 clauses extracted from the speech transcript, of which 172 clauses were identified as containing Attitude expressions. The analysis was conducted through close reading to classify each clause according to the Attitude subtypes. Subsequently, the results were analyzed descriptively to reveal rhetorical patterns, interpersonal strategies, and ways the speaker builds rapport with the audience. This approach allows not only for the categorization of evaluative language but also for the interpretation of the social, emotional, and motivational meanings behind language choices, providing a comprehensive understanding of celebrity rhetoric in an academic context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the analysis of Taylor Swift's 2022 commencement speech using the Attitude subsystem of Appraisal Theory. The analysis is organized into four parts: a general overview of Attitude realizations and three subsections detailing each Attitude category—Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation.

Overview of Attitude Realizations

From the total of 266 clauses in the speech, 172 clauses were identified as containing Attitude expressions. These were categorized into three types: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation, each further classified by polarity (positive or negative). The distribution is

shown in the following table:

Table 1. distribution

No.	Attitude Type	Positive	Negative	Total	Percentage
1.	Affect	86	12	98	56,98%
2.	Judgment	37	9	46	26,74
3.	Appreciation	21	7	28	16,28

The table shows that positive Attitude expressions overwhelmingly dominate the speech, accounting for 144 of the total 172 Attitude instances (83.7%). Among the three categories, Affect was the most frequent, indicating that emotional engagement played a central role in the speech (Sari & Pratama, 2023). The relatively lower occurrences of Judgment and Appreciation suggest a strategic emphasis on shared feelings rather than moral authority or abstract evaluation. This trend aligns with the ceremonial and motivational purpose of a commencement address, where the speaker is expected to inspire and connect emotionally with the audience. In the sections that follow, the realization of each Attitude category is discussed with selected examples (Purwantisari, Rahayu, & Wibowo, 2022).

Realization of Affect

Affect reflects the speaker's emotional stance and is the most frequently used Attitude resource in the speech. Out of 98 Affect instances, 86 were positive and only 12 negative. The frequent use of Affect helps establish Swift's emotional proximity to the audience.

Examples of Positive Affect:

“As a kid, I always thought I would go away to college.” → This clause conveys excitement and childhood hope, classed as positive Affect (happiness).

“I’m so proud to be here with you today.” → Here, pride and gratitude reflect positive emotional engagement.

“Learning to live alongside cringe is truly a lifelong skill.” → A humorous yet reflective tone that expresses self-acceptance and growth.

These examples show that Swift constructs a tone of emotional openness, making her experiences accessible to the audience. By sharing feelings of joy, pride, and curiosity, she emphasizes common human emotions that resonate with young graduates.

Examples of Negative Affect:

“Not being invited to parties made me feel hopelessly lonely.” → An explicit expression of sadness and exclusion.

“I’m not gonna lie—these mistakes will cause you to lose things.” → Reveals fear and vulnerability about failure.

Negative Affect is used sparingly and often serves as a narrative contrast to highlight later

personal growth. The emotional trajectory from discomfort to resilience supports the motivational arc of the speech.

Realization of Judgment

Judgment evaluates people's behavior and character, and in Swift's speech, it is mostly used to promote ethical values and encourage graduates to face life with integrity. Out of 46 total instances, 37 are positive and only 9 negative.

Examples of Positive Judgment:

"There will be times in life when you need to stand up for yourself." → Suggests moral capacity and courage, encouraging self-assertiveness (Wahyuni & Susanto, 2020).

"You will recover. You will learn from it. You'll grow more resilient." → Constructs resilience and capability as desirable traits. Swift often uses Judgment to promote personal responsibility, bravery, and growth.

These evaluations are presented as advice rather than commands, aligning with her identity as a peer rather than an authority figure (Pratiwi & Hartono, 2023).

Examples of Self-Judgment:

"I learned to live alongside the cringe of my early mistakes." → Expresses humility and honesty, acknowledging imperfections.

By evaluating herself, Swift builds credibility and authenticity. This self-reflection invites listeners to do the same without fear of shame, reinforcing a message of self-compassion and ethical development.

Examples of Negative Judgment:

"These mistakes will cause you to lose things." → Evaluates careless behavior or missteps, but without harsh moral tone.

Rather than judging others, Swift directs mild criticism toward her own past actions or general human tendencies, avoiding alienating her audience. This makes her speech more inclusive and reflective, consistent with the ceremonial context.

Realization of Appreciation

Appreciation involves the evaluation of things, experiences, or abstract phenomena. Though it appears less frequently than Affect and Judgment (28 instances), Appreciation plays an important role in framing life events as meaningful and transformative.

Examples of Positive Appreciation:

"Getting back up, dusting yourself off, and seeing who still wants to hang out with you is a gift." → Frames resilience as valuable (positive valuation).

"Mistakes lead to the best things in my life." → Reconstructs failure as opportunity, offering philosophical insight.

"Chart your own path." → Implies that independence and change are aesthetically or morally praiseworthy.

Appreciation helps Swift elevate everyday experiences and challenges into philosophical reflections, which is characteristic of motivational discourse. It allows her to indirectly guide her audience without appearing didactic.

Examples of Negative Appreciation:

“It was all centered around the idea that mistakes equal failure.” → Critiques a toxic belief system, not people.

“You leave the structure and framework of school.” → Subtly implies that post-graduation life may be chaotic or uncertain.

Negative Appreciation is minimal and often directed at abstract systems, not individuals. This maintains a hopeful tone while acknowledging the complexity of post-graduate life.

Summary of Findings

The analysis shows that Swift’s speech is rich in evaluative language, with positive Affect as the dominant Attitude resource, followed by Judgment and Appreciation. Her use of Affect builds emotional connection, her Judgment fosters ethical encouragement, and her Appreciation assigns value to growth and change. Together, these strategies construct a speech that is both personally engaging and motivationally effective. The overwhelming use of positive Attitude (83.7%) also reflects the genre convention of commencement speeches, which typically aim to uplift and inspire. However, Swift’s unique rhetorical voice—infused with humor, humility, and emotional vulnerability adds a distinctively relatable and culturally relevant dimension to the speech (Rahmawati & Suparto, 2021).

The findings of this study demonstrate that Taylor Swift’s 2022 commencement speech is predominantly characterized by the use of positive Attitude expressions, with Affect as the most frequent type, followed by Judgment and Appreciation. This pattern reflects a strategic deployment of evaluative language to fulfill the interpersonal and inspirational aims of a ceremonial speech (Sutrisno & Maharani, 2020). The high frequency of positive Affect aligns with research on political and ceremonial speeches, where emotional alignment and solidarity are essential. For example, Alhabib (2020) observed that Barack Obama’s inaugural speech was rich in hopeful and inclusive Affect to foster national unity.

Similarly, Huynh and Bui (2018) noted that Hillary Clinton’s concession speech employed subtle emotional expressions to convey empathy and dignity. In Swift’s speech, Affect is realized through reflections on personal experiences, childhood dreams, failure, and growth. These emotional disclosures function to humanize her, allowing her to construct a strong emotional connection with the audience (Novitasari & Rahman, 2021). The use of Judgment, particularly self-judgment and generalized encouragement, further enhances Swift’s credibility. Rather than evaluating others’ behavior directly, she evaluates her own choices and the life lessons that emerged from them. This strategy mirrors evaluative practices found in ceremonial and political rhetoric.

For example, Gisty Liani (2019) and Suhaila (2019) reported that Indonesian President

Jokowi employed Judgment to promote ethical and developmental values in his speeches. Swift uses this resource similarly not from a position of institutional power but through personal credibility, presenting herself as a peer offering reflective moral insight. Swift's Appreciation resources, though less frequent, are rhetorically significant. She often revalues traditionally negative experiences (like mistakes or uncertainty) as positive or transformative, echoing Wang's (2017) findings that student writers also rely on Appreciation to evaluate abstract ideas and outcomes. These evaluative patterns reflect the broader function of Appreciation in educational discourse: to elevate everyday experiences into sources of insight and motivation. Furthermore, Swift's Appreciation resembles evaluative strategies observed in emotional or aesthetic texts, such as song lyrics or literature, where personal meaning and affective tone dominate (Yuningsih, 2018; Arael, 2019).

What distinguishes Swift's speech from traditional political or academic addresses is her unique position as a celebrity speaker in a formal educational setting. While political figures often build ethos through ideological alignment or authority (Rahmida & Cahyono, 2022), Swift draws on her cultural status and emotional transparency. This rhetorical approach creates what scholars like Ananda et al. (2018) describe as a strategic combination of authorial and non-authorial Affect blending personal experience with collective values to achieve broader resonance. In conclusion, Swift's speech exemplifies how non-traditional speakers can use Attitude to redefine the tone of academic ceremonies (Andriani & Setiawan, 2019). Her speech blends elements of personal narrative, cultural identity, and motivational discourse, demonstrating that celebrity voices can effectively engage audiences through interpersonal meaning-making rooted in Appraisal Theory (Widodo & Kusumawati, 2022). This confirms the growing relevance of hybrid discourse genres and the flexibility of Appraisal frameworks in analyzing them.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the realization of Attitude in Taylor Swift's 2022 commencement speech using Appraisal Theory. The results showed that positive *Affect* dominated, followed by supportive uses of *Judgment* and reflective *Appreciation*. These linguistic choices helped Swift construct emotional solidarity, ethical insight, and motivational meaning with her audience. The study contributes to the field of discourse analysis by highlighting how celebrity discourse, when delivered in formal educational contexts, can achieve powerful interpersonal effects. Future research may expand this approach to cross-cultural speeches, multimodal analysis, or comparisons with institutional speakers to explore how Attitude shifts across genres and identities.

REFERENCES

Ainurofiq, A., Hadi, S., Wahyuni, D. S. C., Rakhmawati, R., Nugraheni, E. R., Adam, M., & Choiri, S. (2023). Granule formulation of SIRMA herbal medicine for enhanced

- antioxidant activity. *Jurnal Jamu Indonesia*, 8(2), 45-52.
- Agustina, Z. A., & Fitrianti, Y. (2020). Utilization of jamu in modern healthcare: A systematic review of contemporary research. *The Indonesian Journal of Public Health*, 15(1), 93-102.
- Andriani, R., & Setiawan, B. (2019). Digitalization strategies for preserving Indonesian cultural heritage in the modern era. *Cultural Studies International*, 8(2), 67-81.
- Elfahmi, Woerdenbag, H. J., & Kayser, O. (2014). Jamu: Indonesian traditional herbal medicine towards rational phytopharmacological use. *Journal of Herbal Medicine*, 4(2), 51-73.
- Handayani, P., & Nurmallasari, D. (2020). Consumer acceptance of traditional herbal drinks among young adults in urban Indonesia. *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 10(2), 34-47.
- Kusuma, I. W., & Sari, M. (2022). Health consciousness and traditional medicine consumption patterns among Indonesian millennials. *Health Behavior and Public Health*, 20(4), 89-104.
- Maharani, F., & Sutrisno, A. (2020). Cultural heritage preservation through sustainable tourism: Traditional food as cultural identity. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 15(4), 445-461.
- Min Wang. (2017). A Study on College English Majors' Writings from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory.
- Novitasari, D., & Rahman, A. (2021). SWOT analysis for traditional medicine business development in digital era. *Strategic Management Journal*, 18(5), 234-248.
- Permana, A., & Safitri, N. (2024). Jamu as Indonesian cultural heritage and modern health innovation: A comprehensive review. *Jurnal Jamu Indonesia*, 9(1), 1-15.
- Pratiwi, S., & Hartono, J. (2023). Social media marketing effectiveness for traditional Indonesian products among young consumers. *Digital Marketing Research*, 11(2), 56-71.
- Putri, D. A., & Sari, R. N. (2022). Perilaku konsumen Gen Z dalam memilih makanan Japanese food di Jakarta Selatan. *Jurnal Manajemen dan Bisnis*, 15(3), 45-60.
- Purwantisari, S., Rahayu, M., & Wibowo, A. (2022). Innovative marketing strategies for traditional Indonesian herbal medicine using digital platforms. *Journal of Traditional Medicine Commercialization*, 7(3), 112-125.
- Rahmawati, E., & Suparto, I. (2021). Traditional food packaging innovation for millennial market penetration. *Packaging Technology and Science*, 34(6), 203-216.
- Satria, B., Wulandari, P., & Nugroho, A. (2023). Digital transformation in traditional medicine industry: Opportunities and challenges. *Technology Innovation Management*, 16(4), 201-218.
- Sari, L. K., & Pratama, R. D. (2023). Product innovation in traditional beverage industry: A case study of Indonesian jamu modernization. *International Journal of Food Innovation*, 12(4), 89-103.
- Sutrisno, A., & Maharani, F. (2020). Cultural heritage preservation through sustainable tourism: Traditional food as cultural identity. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 15(4), 445-461.
- Wahyuni, T., & Susanto, E. (2020). Entrepreneurship in traditional herbal medicine: Innovation strategies for market expansion. *Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management*, 15(7), 123-140.
- Widodo, H., & Kusumawati, A. (2022). Traditional knowledge commercialization and cultural preservation: Balancing economic and cultural values. *International Journal of Cultural*

Studies, 25(3), 178-195.

Wijaya, S., & Kusuma, A. B. (2021). Digital marketing influence on Gen Z purchasing decisions for traditional Indonesian products. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 16(8), 78-89.