

# Evaluative Language

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In its widest understanding, evaluative language (EL) includes the range of linguistic resources that may be used to express language users' attitude or stance (views or feelings) to entities in the real world (e.g., France is a beautiful country; I love my children) or to propositions (e.g., I'm sure they are right; it is essential that they start now). EL expresses speakers' or writers' views of the world (representational dimension) and, at the same time, typically engages with, shapes, and influences others' views and feelings (interpersonal dimension). To the extent that EL is expected at particular points in texts and speech (e.g., laziness is never a virtue ... at the end of a fairy tale) it also has cohesive properties (structural dimension).

Evaluation may be expressed along various parameters including: levels of certainty/probability; obligation/desirability; appreciation and judgment; emotive impact; relevance/importance; reliability; expectedness; comprehensibility, etc. Most of these parameters work on a basic high/low or positive/negative continuum. Further key variables affecting the nature and impact of evaluation are: the source (whether the evaluation is authorial or attributed to third parties), the target (e.g., whether entities or people or the material presented), the degree of subjectivity versus factuality embedded in the evaluation (e.g., brilliant may be a more subjective evaluation than thin, referring to a person), and levels of explicitness (e.g., I felt embarrassed is a more explicit way of referring to one's feelings than saying: I didn't know what to say).

While some evaluative meanings, including levels of certainty and obligation, may be associated with specific linguistic items (e.g., modal verbs and adverbs in some languages), others, such as positive or negative appreciation, are typically realized cumulatively over long stretches of text/speech and through varying and unpredictable lexicogrammatical operators.

The distinction between evaluative and nonevaluative language is often problematic in that evaluative meaning is particularly context-dependent so that many expressions may be primarily factual in some contexts (e.g., a red car) and evaluative (positive or negative) in others (e.g., a red nose or red lips). The criteria for positive and negative evaluation of specific entities (e.g., places, products, and people) rely to a large extent on unstable and varying sociocultural assumptions and expectations. Evaluation is, therefore, often implicit in the description of events rather than explicitly conveyed. A Victorian property, for example, may be a neutral or positive description, depending on the value placed on particular period properties by particular people at particular times. Similarly, in any advertising context, descriptions assigned to a product acquire a positive connotation simply in the light of the overall promotional function of the text,

so that, for example, silky hair or tangy taste is perceived as positive evaluation. It can be argued that, at some level, evaluation is intrinsic to all language and that the difference between evaluative and nonevaluative language is only a matter of degree.

## **Development of the concept**

More easily identifiable evaluation-bearing elements of language have been studied in isolation from the very beginning of linguistic investigation. The most studied area has been the English modal system, including modal verbs (e.g., may, must, might, should, will), modal adverbs (e.g., possibly, certainly) and related expressions (e.g., it is likely/desirable). It is clear that such linguistic items are used to calibrate language users' expression of (un)certainly or obligation toward propositions in sentences such as: The train may be late or you must finish the work. The linguistic classification of modal verbs into, essentially, epistemic and deontic categories (relating to the speaker's commitment to the truth values of propositions or expressing the necessity of a certain course of action) was derived from philosophy (specifically, modal logic). The prevailing view was that it was possible to clearly distinguish between propositional (unmodalized, objective, or referential) representation and nonpropositional (modalized, subjective, or evaluative) linguistic representation.

A more general understanding of attitude and evaluation has been, however, reflected, since ancient times, in the notion of mood and formalized in the grammatical categories of indicative, conditional, subjunctive, and imperative. Grammatical mood is much more salient in Indo-European languages than modern English. In these languages, differences in mood are conveyed through morphological modification of the verb and are triggered by particular expressions of uncertainty, obligation as well as other opinion and emotive stances (e.g., I am not sure whether ...; I doubt that ...; They expect you to ...; It is remarkable that ...). A number of languages have also developed a range of morphological structures that may be used to convey evaluative and referential meaning in the same expression, so-called diminutive forms (comparable to English endings -y and -ie in words such as kittie, birdie, nannie, mommy). In all these cases, the relevant evaluative content is, overall, more closely merged with the referential content and lexical and grammatical aspects are similarly harder to distinguish.

There has also been a long-standing tradition in semantic theory of identifying evaluative components of word meaning. The distinction is made, for example, between denotative (referential, literal) meaning, connotative meaning (referring to real-world experience associated with an expression, e.g., the word summer may connote sun, beach, holiday) and affective meaning (relating to the personal feelings that the speaker associates with the word, e.g., the word summer may be associated with an unpleasant feeling of boredom for some people).

Once the focus shifted from studies of decontextualized, often prefabricated, sentences and words to the investigation of discourse (in domains such as pragmatics, conversation, and discourse analysis), it became increasingly clear that, in all languages, evaluative meaning is conveyed by language users through a combination of different

expressions, whether grammatical or lexical or a blend of both, rather than being clearly embedded in specific expressions as such. One of the earliest references to evaluation as a discourse rather than a grammatical or semantic property may be found in the work by Labov (1972). Labov, and others after him, consider EL as the means used by a narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, for example, why it is funny, amazing, scaring. According to this perspective, EL occurs throughout the narrative (forming a “secondary structure”) but it tends to cluster at various points, particularly at the beginning and at the end.

The number of lexicogrammatical structures that have the potential to express evaluation in discourse were found to be very wide, including particularly but not exclusively: intensifiers and quantifiers (such as *very*, *highly*, and *many*), comparators (*larger/smaller than ...*), superlatives (*largest*, *smallest ...*), hedges (*sort of*, *actually ...*), negatives, questions, imperatives, and subordinators as well as the more obvious adverbs, verbs, and adjectives of affect, certainty and doubt, explicitly evaluative and emotive lexis, emphatics, and modals. One type of expression that is increasingly being used in online communication to express evaluative meaning (with a strong emotive component) is abbreviations such as LOL or symbols such as emoticons as well as more conventional punctuation marks. Such expressions are so far understudied as they lie at the boundary between the linguistic and, the more generally, semiotic levels.

Further developments of the concepts have followed two main directions. Many studies have continued to focus on nonpropositional evaluative resources that can be seen to fulfill a specific evaluative function at the level of discourse structure and cohesion. Examples are hedges (e.g., *possibly*), boosters (e.g., *of course*), attitudinal (meta)-discourse markers (e.g., *importantly*, *surprisingly*, *truly*), and subordinating *that*-clauses (e.g., *I agree that ...*) that typically express authorial stance on the material presented and may be clearly distinguished from the material itself, as in the case of the modal expressions seen above. In all these expressions the interactional function of evaluation is the most prominent. The extent to which attitude and evaluation may be expressed through changes in word order (particularly in languages other than English in which word order is more flexible) has also been investigated as part of this specific attention to overall structure and cohesion.

Other studies have focused on lexicalized propositional evaluation, which may be conveyed through the use of explicitly evaluative language, particularly adjectives, such as *beautiful*, *terrifying*, or *despicable*, but is often conveyed implicitly, triggered in context, and merged with referential meaning, as seen in the examples of the Victorian property and *silky hair*. As mentioned above, the expressive strategies that can be adopted by speakers and writers in discourse are articulated through a whole text rather than clearly embedded in single expressions or parts. The type of social interaction enacted through discourse (whether spoken or written) is typically realized through the participants’ self-expression and evaluation (views and feelings) and the distinction between EL and non-EL is often a matter of degree rather than clear cut.

The terminology used to describe EL is also varied, inconsistent, and overlapping as different linguists have, in turn, focused on its different dimensions and properties. Influential contributions include Ochs and Schiefflen’s (1989) study of affect, Finegan’s (1995) exploration of subjectivity, Biber and Finegan’s (1989) classification of stance,

Lemke's (1998) study of evaluation and attitudinal meaning, and Martin and White's (2005) development of the notion of appraisal.

The latter two approaches/theories stand out for the strength of their explanatory power, breadth, insight, and extent of applications. Lemke favors a unitary perspective, emphasizing the fact that attitude and evaluation have not only interpersonal but also referential aspects. The argument is that when we write or talk about the world we can at the same time express to others to what extent we believe that what we say is likely, desirable, important, surprising, serious, and so forth.

Appraisal theory is a theory of EL developed by researchers working in Systemic Functional Linguistics (particularly, Martin & White, 2005). The theory distinguishes between types of attitude (personal affect, judgment of people, and appreciation of objects as in: I love tennis; she is insincere; the concert was a disaster) and the ways in which language users interact with their target audience by including and engaging with other voices (e.g., endorsing or dismissing them) in the presentation of views and events as in: some critics have claimed that ... ; it is possible to conclude that ... ; it is suggested that ... .

In this way, a clear separation is maintained between evaluation as language users' estimation of possibility and desirability, on the one hand (the engagement dimension) and evaluation as emotive response or assessment of human behavior or entities by reference to shared values, on the other (the attitudinal dimension). Expression of feeling is seen as central to evaluation in that judgment and appreciation are conceived as forms of institutionalized feelings. Although both attitudinal and engagement dimensions of appraisal are formally ascribed an interpersonal function, it is clear that attitudinal expressions also have a referential function (presenting particular views of the world). This is particularly obvious in implicit formulations in which the speaker's attitude is conveyed through specific representations of participants and events (as in, she hugged her husband, possibly implicitly conveying the speaker's positive evaluation of the wife as a caring person).

A large number of studies have focused on the use of EL in specific registers, further highlighting the context-dependent nature of EL and the prevalence of certain types of evaluation in particular registers (e.g., degrees of certainty in scientific material, levels of appreciation of food in restaurant reviews or degrees of positive self-judgment in curriculum vitas, the articulation of various evaluation types in more complex argumentative and persuasive discourse). News-reporting and commenting, academic writing, and advertising are among the most commonly investigated registers. The expression of EL in spoken and dialogic discourse types has received comparably less attention due, possibly, to the traditional preference of discourse analysts in linguistics for the analysis of written discourse. Within analysis of conversation, evaluation is typically seen as one of the functions of speakers' stance-taking. By taking a stance the speaker evaluates an object, positions themselves as a subject and aligns themselves with other subjects. If, however, stance is equated to evaluation in the wider sense seen in discourse, then the perspectives are very similar: The referential and interpersonal functions of evaluation are similarly captured.

EL is, however, not only genre/register-specific but also culture-specific. Cross-cultural studies of EL have highlighted aspects of evaluative expression that are

particularly susceptible to cultural preferences in general or in specific registers. Such aspects include not only the distribution and type of evaluation but also levels of explicitness and intensity.

Within more recent multimodal approaches to discourse analysis, linguists and other scholars have started to explore the ways in which verbal expressive resources combine with nonverbal resources (e.g., images and sound) to convey particular perspectives of the world. When spoken features (intonation as well as facial expression and body language) and visual aspects (such as color, composition, and focus) are taken into account, the underlying emotive basis of evaluation is particularly salient, even in conventionally factual registers such as TV news-reporting. In written discourse, conversely, the emotive element of evaluation is often reduced through the absence of nonverbal expressive features.

Automated corpus analysis has proven particularly useful in identifying register-specific EL. It has also been used to reveal the latent evaluative meaning associated with certain expressions that typically collocate with either positive or negative words. Examples include the verbs *cause* (typically associated with negative situations such as: pain, distress, offense) and *bring about* (typically associated with positive situations such as: peace, justice, the agreement). Corpus analysis has also revealed common grammatical patterns associated with evaluative meaning (such as adjectives in the constructions: *I consider it X or it was X of him to ...*) or phraseological expressions that typically intensify evaluation (such as: *as is humanly possible or a fair share of ...*). On the whole, automatic analysis has proven reasonably successful in studies focusing on nonpropositional or explicit EL, that is, when discreet lexicogrammatical structures may be isolated and coded in specific registers. It is widely used, for example, to quickly compute overall ratings of products and services from the readily available opinion and review websites (opinion-mining or sentiment analysis). It is, however, less successful when the evaluation is very implicit, highly context dependent and embedded in complex registers.

SEE ALSO: Appraisal Theory; Conversation Analysis, Overview; Corpus Analysis; Discourse Analysis; Discourse Markers; Emotion and Affect; Modality; Narrative; Stance-Taking; Systemic Functional Linguistics

## References

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### Further reading

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