

SUBJECTIVITY IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE COMMENTARIES - AN APPRAISAL CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses Appraisal framework to identify Attitude and Engagement resources in a selection of texts in order to reveal the level of “subjectivity” in commentaries about political events taken from two online newspapers: The New York Times and Tuổi Trẻ. The results show that although there are some differences in the frequency and the linguistic features of these resources, the genre in the two languages shares a variety of similarities in their subjectivity level.

Keywords: Appraisal, attitude, commentary, engagement, subjectivity.

TÓM TẮT

Yếu tố chủ quan trong các bài bình luận báo chí Tiếng Anh và Tiếng Việt: Nghiên cứu đối chiếu dưới góc nhìn của thuyết Đánh giá

Nghiên cứu ứng dụng lý thuyết đánh giá để nhận diện và luận giải mức độ chủ quan trong các bản tin bình luận về các sự kiện chính trị từ báo The New York Times và Tuổi trẻ. Kết quả cho thấy mặc dù có sự khác biệt về mức độ sử dụng và các đặc điểm ngôn ngữ, mức độ chủ quan được bộc lộ là khá tương đồng ở hai ngôn ngữ ở cả bình diện thái độ và tham thoại và thể hiện sự diễn đạt có tính chủ quan của người bình tin.

Từ khóa: Thuyết đánh giá, thái độ, bình luận tin, tham thoại, tính chủ quan.

1. Introduction

As a typical genre of media discourse, the newspaper commentary is considered a persuasive writing with the expression and communication of opinions about current news events. Therefore, it is assumed that subjectivity is possibly the typical nature of this genre. Investigation into the level of objectivity and subjectivity in media texts has been popularly done by many Appraisal scholars (White, 2000; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin, & White, 2005; Martin & Rose, 2003; Vo, 2011; White, 2002). They have paid much attention to evaluation analysis to find out how various feelings, attitudes and stances can be expressed. Their studies have proved that Appraisal theory can bring about how subjective a discourse is through two dimensions namely Attitude and Engagement. However, a comparative analysis of subjectivity in English and Vietnamese commentaries using Appraisal framework seems to be an untouched problem. Therefore, this paper aims at using Appraisal framework to identify Attitude and Engagement resources in a selection of texts in order to reveal the level of “subjectivity” in totally 30 commentaries about political events taken from two online newspapers: The New York Times and Tuổi Trẻ.

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2. Appraisal theory and its application in media texts

Appraisal Theory has been developed by Jim Martin, Peter White and others within the school of SFL theory. According to Martin & Rose (2003), appraisal is a system of interpersonal meaning. The theory deals with three resources: **Attitude** (the kinds of attitude negotiated in the text), **Graduation** (the strength of feelings), and **Engagement** (the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned).

Attitude is the essence of emotion the appraiser conveys about the object. Love, anger, fear, jealousy, excitement, hostility, satisfaction, etc. are emotions or attitudes that can be expressed in appraisal groups. It can be divided into three categories- *Affect*, *Judgment*, and *Appreciation*.

Affect is concerned with the construal of ‘emotional reaction to events, for example, feelings of shock, elation and so on’ (Martin & White, 2005). The resources can be categorized into two sub-types: Authorial Affect which is related to the writer’s emotion, and non- authorial Affect, the others’ feelings.

Judgment resources are concerned with the assessment of human behavior based on a set of established social norms and expectations. White (2001) contends that *Judgment* concerns itself with linguistic resources “which criticize or praise, which condemn or applaud the behavior – actions, deeds, sayings, beliefs, motivations etc. – of human individuals and groups.” Martin & White (2005) also reconfirm *Judgment* deals with attitudes towards behavior, which we admire or criticize, praise or condemn.

Appreciation is ‘the evaluation of objects by reference to aesthetic principles and other systems of social value’ (White, 1998 and White, 2010). This value works with the analysis of linguistic ‘resources that construe values of things including natural phenomena and semiosis’ (Martin & White, 2005).

Graduation is the gradable feature of feelings and emotions, which indicates the up-scaled or down-scaled characteristic of attitudinal meanings. It is realized in two amplification resources: *Force* and *Focus*. (Martin & Rose, 2003)

Engagement deals with the source of attitudes, the question of who is doing the evaluating. Martin & Rose (2003) use the term ‘heterogloss’ to refer to dialogistic alternatives in the communicative context and ‘monogloss’ to refer to proposition informing the fact or truth, without any attitude elements involved.

Heteroglossic resources consist of two categories: dialogically expansive and dialogically contractive resources. The former refers to actively making space for dialogically alternative positions and voices, whereas the latter acts to confront, turn aside or restrain them.

Many researchers such as Aírese & Perucha (2006), Jullian (2011), Pounds (2010), & Vo (2011) have proved Appraisal as an integral framework used to understand the ideology of the media texts or to investigate the reporter and the journalist voice. They seem to share the same viewpoint in that using Appraisal Theory can clarify the voice of the journalists and editorial board. In the similar way, Bednarek (2006) argues an Appraisal analysis is a new useful insight into the subjectivity within media discourse.

According to White (2005), in deciding whether a text is objective or subjective, the analyst must depend on the number of language resources realized as a signal of factuality or a presence of authors. Taken this into the analysis, we decide that if a text contains a larger number of evaluation elements such as Attitude or Engagement than resources of factuality, it is considered to be subjective.

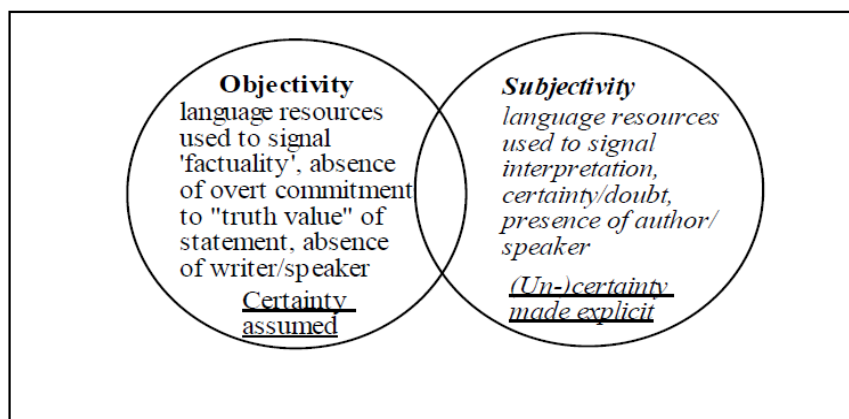


Figure 1. Comparing and contrasting objective and subjective stances/ resources (White, 2005)

2. Data analysis and findings

The data for this study were 30 commentaries from The New York Times and Tuoi Tre. Specifically, 15 English and the other 15 Vietnamese political articles published online from 2014 to 2016 were downloaded from The New York Times and Tuoi tre, respectively. After being coded from E1 to E15 (for the English data) and V1 to V15 (for the Vietnamese data), they were analyzed to find out the occurrences of explicit Attitude and Engagement resources included in the separate clauses, which were then qualitatively interpreted to reveal the level of subjectivity of the articles. Thus, the data were both qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed.

In the English data, the total number of clauses in 15 articles is 723 (coded as C1E1, which means clause 1 in English commentary 1), 562 of which contain either Attitude or Engagement or both, accounting for 77.8%, and 161 of which consist of no value of these two resources. A similar proportion is also found in the Vietnamese commentaries with 285 out of 378 clauses (coded as C1V1, which means clause 1 in Vietnamese commentary 1) (accounting for approximately 75.3%) containing Attitude or Engagement. As shown in Figure 2, the control is subjectivity, indicating that both English and Vietnamese commentaries are concerned so much with the opinions and assessments of the writers to the external voices.

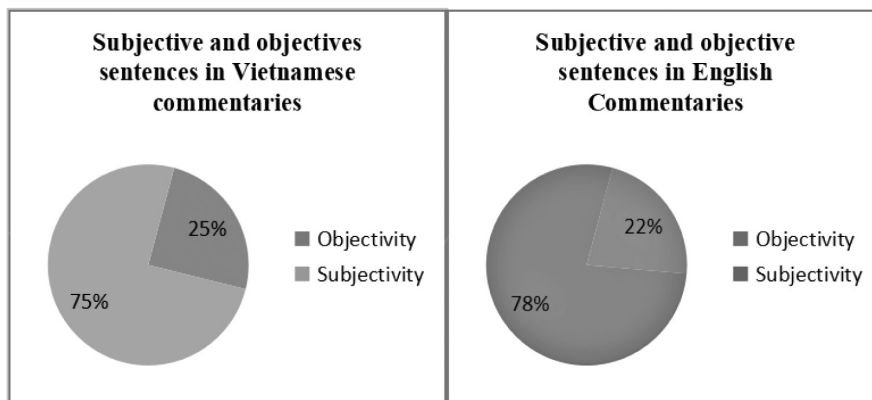


Figure 2. Frequency of subjective and objective sentences in Vietnamese and English data

As proved in Aírese & Perucha (2006), Bednarek (2006), and Vo (2011), Attitude and Engagement are two main elements contributing subjectivity to the texts. Consequently, with the high frequency of these resources, the data reveal that subjectivity seems to be an integral factor contributing to generic features of this genre no matter what language it is written in. Interestingly, in many cases of the two data, both of these resources appear in one sentence, making the evaluative factor clearer. For example, in C15E8 “*staggering*”, “*sadly*” and “*rare*” are Attitude elements to show the way writer judged event involved, while “*might*” and “*not*” are Engagement resources which show the invitation for another view about the event. The density of these evaluative elements certainly makes the text more subjective.

C15E8: While staggering, this tragedy might, sadly, not be rare.

3.1. Subjectivity expressed in Attitudinal resources

In considering Attitude, we are concerned with those sentences which convey a negative or a positive assessment of people, objects, happenings and states of events. A detailed analysis of the elements of Attitude including Judgment, Appreciation, and Affect in the data of the two languages is provided below.

In English data, the number of sentences containing Attitude elements is 425, accounting for 58.7%, the majority of which falls into Judgment with 32% and the second most popular is Appreciation with 17.3%. Only 9.4% are realized by Affect elements. The similar choice of Attitude resources can also be seen in the Vietnamese data with 52.3% of the total number of sentences. However, there is a difference in the percentage of the three sub - types Judgment, Appreciation and Affect of this resource in the Vietnamese commentaries - 26.8%, 19.6% and 5.9% respectively.

Judgment refers to evaluation of human behavior. The evaluation may reflect individual beliefs and experiences corresponding with social norms and expectations which operate in a society (White, 2001); therefore, the high occurrence of Judgment in a text will prove its subjectivity level.

The realization of Judgment in the two languages shows both similarities and differences. While most Judgment resources in English commentaries fall into the modal verb category as in

the cases of C26E11, C13E7, C8E2, only some Vietnamese sentences contain this part of speech as in C8V1, and C14V9

C26E11: *First, Congress should require disclosure of real owners of shell companies, using powers granted by our Constitution's commerce clause.*

C13E7: *You can get an idea of how well bank regulations work in the world of high finance from Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme.*

C8E2: *Western financial institutions may have the most to lose.*

C8V1: *Nhà Trắng cho rằng ông Obama có thể giúp bà Clinton thu hút các cử tri độc lập,*

C14V9: *Dù vậy, những lãnh đạo cấp cao của đảng Cộng hòa vẫn không thể bác bỏ hoàn toàn lý lẽ của Haugland.*

Apart from modal verbs, Judgment is also realized by a variety of parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives in the two languages as in the following examples.

C9V9: *Sau nhiều năm bị ngó lơ và xem như chương ngại vật trong đảng, giờ đây, Haugland trở thành một trong những người "nguy hiểm" nhất trên chính trường, theo Politico. (Judgment noun)*

C8E4: *One of the most prominent subjects of the report is Russian President Vladimir Putin, although his name does not appear in the documents. (Judgment adjective)*

C22E14: *President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson did not immediately confirm that he had accepted the resignation. (Judgment Adverb)*

C3V6: *Theo các trợ lý cấp cao của ông Obama, Nhà Trắng đang tích cực thảo luận với đội ngũ phụ trách chiến dịch tranh cử của cựu ngoại trưởng. (Judgment Adverb)*

C9E3: *Members of the Group of 20 — which includes China — have agreed on paper to tighten laws relating to shell companies. (Judgment Verb)*

C16V9: *Do đó, Haugland đang chống lại mọi hình thức bầu cử sơ bộ, nhất là những cuộc bầu cử sơ bộ mở, theo thể thức được ăn cả ngã về không. (Judgment Verb)*

It can be seen from the Judgment analysis that commentators of the data chose various parts of speech to present their evaluation on the people involved and their behavior, thus making the texts more subjective as proved in White (2001), Pounds (2010) and Jullian (2011).

Appreciation resources are also largely used to express evaluations of the state of affairs in as far as authorial assessments and evaluations are concerned. Unlike Judgment, Appreciation deals with “positive and negative assessments of objects, artefacts, processes and states of affairs rather than with human behavior” (White, 2001). The most popular parts of speech used for this resource in the two data are adjectives (C8E12, C9E15, C4V9). In some cases, nouns are also used to show the evaluation on the involved entities (C19E3, C17V13).

C8E12: *Shell companies aren't in themselves illegal.*

C9E15: *Regulations, however, are ineffective and riddled with loopholes.*

C4V9: *Haugland cho rằng ngôn từ trong điều này là “gian lận”, trái với một quy trình đúng đắn.*

C19E3: *Gunnlaugson has denied any wrongdoing.*

C17V13: *Bryne cũng chính là người đưa ra lời than phiền dẫn tới việc chuyển Monica Lewinsky, người tình của ông Bill, từ Nhà Trắng, nơi cô đang làm thực tập sinh, sang Lầu Năm Góc.*

It can be seen that the commentators of the two data mainly used adjectives to show their evaluation on things and events involved. Like Judgment, these Appreciation resources also bring subjectivity to the commentaries in question.

The last sub-type of Attitude is Affect. Affect values reveal the emotions either of the author or of the appraiser about people, things or events. If the writer strongly emphasizes his subjective presence in the utterance, it is the case of authorial Affect (White, 2001). In the case of non-authorial Affect, the speakers or writers describe emotions of other human individuals or groups. They seemingly suppress their presence and report only on the emotional reactions of the people who are involved in a particular event. Thus they are relieved from (at least) direct responsibility for the assessment of such emotions.

With only 9.4% in the English data and 5.9% in the Vietnamese one, it seems that the main purpose of this genre is not to express personal feelings. Almost all the emotions expressed in the data are non-authorial Affect, showing that the commentators of the two languages hesitated in revealing their own feelings by authorial Affect. Generally, in the instances of non-authorial Affect the emotional evaluation made by the author of the report is not expressed explicitly because the author's voice is not present in the utterances. However, the non-direct assessment offers the reporter a range of possibilities to mediate emotions to the readers without making the text sound too subjective, e.g. reporting affectual positionings on part of the interviewed people which may correspond with the author's opinion. These resources are realized in verbs (as in C14V8), nouns (as in C16E1) and adjectives (as in C15E3 and C10V8).

C14V8: Các cổ vấn của ông Obama cũng như bà Clinton đều tin rằng tổng thống sẽ là tiếng nói có sức thuyết phục đối với các cử tri còn đang cho rằng bà Clinton khó gần,

C16E1: China expressed anger on Wednesday after a senior British official said a ruling expected within a few months

C15E3: An estimated 8,000 angry protesters gathered outside in Reykjavik

C10V8: Theo các cổ vấn, ông Obama đặc biệt hứng thú với việc chặn đứng đối thủ đảng Cộng hòa Donald Trump.

Overall, although there are some small differences in the percentage and the realization of three sub - types of Attitude in the data of the two languages, the results show that subjectivity obviously exist in this genre, which can be clearly seen in Judgment, Appreciation and Affect resources. The commentators used these resources to show the attitude and to evaluate people, things and the events involved in the commentaries, making subjectivity for the discourses as illustrated in White (2001), Vo (2011), Pounds (2010) and Jullian (2011).

3.2. Subjectivity expressed in Engagement resources

Another category of Appraisal analyzing the inter-subjective relationship of the author to the text and to the message which it contains, is called Engagement (White, 2002).

Despite the varying number of occurrences between the two groups, the distribution of monoglossic and heteroglossic resources in commentaries of the two languages is similar in that the heteroglossic resources are chosen more frequently than the monoglossic ones. In the English data, Heteroglossia accounts for a larger proportion (84.5%), whereas the proportion

of Monoglossia is nearly one-fifth of that of Heteroglossia. Similarly, Vietnamese data reveal a preference for Heteroglossia which account for 75.7%. This undoubtedly illustrates that the authors of the two languages usually allow for dialogistic alternatives.

These following examples illustrate that monoglossic statements project the writer's voice in a neutral way, but they limit the room for the negotiation of claims. This means that these writers are construing a reader with whom they assume they share a similar position.

C18E3: The G-20 leaders adopted 14 principles in November 2014 at a summit in Brisbane, Australia.

C11V2: Trước đó vào đầu năm 2013, tàu chiến Trung Quốc sử dụng hệ thống radar điều khiển vũ khí để “khóa mục tiêu” một tàu khu trục và một máy bay trực thăng của Nhật Bản.

In these types of sentences, the writers just act the role of informing the factuality, which means they contribute objectivity to the texts. If a text mainly contains these resources, it will be considered as an objective report.

The frequent deployment of heteroglossic resources lends support to the established notion that texts are loaded with either the writer's voice or other voices, confirming the influential view of Bakhtin (cited in Aírese & Perucha, 2006) that utterances are “pregnant with responses and objections”. This finding supports many studies (Aírese & Perucha, 2006; Martin & White, 2005; White, 2003) which have argued that commentaries are heavily populated with multivoiced choices.

Heteroglossia is the author's assessments of opinions, so it obviously expresses subjectivity in the texts. Space for heteroglossic choices is created using modality, countering, negation and projection and can be divided into two types: Expansion and Contraction. The results show that there is a preference for Expansion rather than Contraction in both languages (67% vs. 33% in English, and 74% vs. 26% in Vietnamese). This shows the writer's intention of giving their opinion as one among other propositions available in the current communicative context.

Here are the illustrations of Heteroglossia Expansions and Contractions.

The first type of Expansion can be seen in projections. Projecting voices are external voices in the text, represented through reporting verbs “say”, “state”, “declare”, “report” and so on. The writer attributes the proposition to the other voice and shows impartiality towards the proposition being advanced, so creating a space for the diverse opinions of readers (Martin & White, 2005) as seen in the following examples,

C16V3: Một quan chức NATO cho hay liên minh đang cân nhắc thành lập một trung tâm tình báo mới giúp điều phối việc chia sẻ thông tin tình báo quân sự giữa các nước thành viên.

C21E1: Hugo Swire, British minister of state responsible for East Asia, also said Britain saw the ruling, by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, as an opportunity for China and the Philippines to renew dialogue over their territorial disputes.

According to Pounds (2010), these projections appear to add a personal and subjective dimension to the reporting, even though the source of the subjectivity is the reporting voice of the participants rather than the author's.

The sentences containing such words as *likely*, *perhaps*, *seems*, *maybe* indicate that the authors selected to open up dialogic space, representing the proposition as one of a range of

possible positions, thus encouraging the readers to choose their own stance (White, 2002). These form another realization of Expansion.

C6E5: They are likely to be disappointed.

C15V4: Đây có thể trở thành một công cụ chống IS hữu hiệu.

On the contrary, the opposite can be seen in the sentences containing “*in fact*”, “*certainly*”, or “*no doubt*” which indicates that the writers are quite certain about the information, thus close the opportunity for the other voice, creating Contraction elements.

C6E7: Some polls, in fact, are now showing Trump winning the not-entirely-hypothetical matchup—and the trend is certainly in his favor.

C23E15: The contest would no doubt be the most-watched event in Sanders’ political life

C16V12: Thực tế, bộ chỉ huy chuyển đổi được thành lập năm 2002, một thời gian ngắn sau vụ khủng bố 11/9.

Another case of Contraction can be seen in elements of Deny like “*never*”, “*no*”, “*not*”. The function of the use of these resources seems not to offer a “correct” view of real or potential alternative assumptions, but to emphasize the importance of the writers’ contributions by establishing a contrast with what other members of the community have not yet achieved.

C3E14: No replacement has yet been named, and President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson did not immediately confirm that he had accepted the resignation.

C10V6: Thời điểm Bộ trưởng Quốc phòng Pháp đưa ra tuyên bố không hề ngẫu nhiên.

The other type of contractive disclamation is Counter. In these cases, these proposal writers decided to introduce other voices to challenge them, ultimately strengthening their own position. Three instances were identified, realized through “*yet*”, “*however*”, “*although*”, and “*but*”, as shown in the following examples:

C5E2: Recent American statements have been more definitive about US interests, but have not amounted to a strategy.

C19E1: While carefully avoiding the use of its increasingly modern southern fleet, it is nonetheless playing a supportive over-the-horizon role.

C9V11: Dù vậy, thượng nghị sĩ Sanders vẫn nuôi hy vọng các siêu đại biểu ủng hộ bà Clinton thay đổi quyết định vào phút chót. Nhưng cơ hội để ông lật ngược thế cờ rất nhỏ bé.

Consequently, the results of analyzing Engagement show that subjectivity seems to be more dominant in the data of the two languages than objectivity, which is exactly the same as the results of analyzing Attitude in the previous part.

3. Conclusion

This paper has explored subjectivity levels using the analysis of the Attitude and Engagement patterns in journalistic commentaries written in English and Vietnamese. As regards the Attitude, the results indicate that the commentators of both languages used these resources, though at a different frequency, to show the attitude and to evaluate people, things and the events. It means that the authors not only report issues of public interest but also insert their opinions or feelings into expositions making the texts in question subjective. With regard to the distribution of Engagement resources across languages, apart from some differences in the occurrences

and the part of speeches realized in each language, the commentary texts also share the same characteristics of the genre in English and Vietnamese in revealing the subjectivity of the writer voice and the reader - writer inter-subjectivity, and the expression of the perspective of some external voice.

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