



Evaluative Language in U.S. Presidential Media Coverage: An Appraisal Analysis and Its Pedagogical Implications for ELT

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Abstract

Background and Aim: This study explores how two major U.S. newspapers, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, utilized evaluative language to assess U.S. presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump during the 2024 election campaign. Addressing a gap in media bias research within political discourse through the use of appraisal analysis, the study focuses on the judgment of social esteem and social sanction, which investigate how the candidates were portrayed, contributing to discussions on media portrayals that shape public perception.

Materials and Methods: Appraisal theory was applied to analyze 35 selected articles from both online newspapers in a span of six months from January to June 2024, specifically examining evaluative language related to social esteem and social sanction. This qualitative study aimed to identify patterns in how each candidate was represented, particularly regarding their leadership, policies, and personal attributes.

Results: The findings indicate that both newspapers generally portrayed Biden positively in terms of social esteem, emphasizing his leadership experience, especially in foreign policy. However, as the campaign progressed, negative judgments related to social sanction surfaced, particularly critiquing Biden's age and his handling of domestic issues like immigration. Trump, on the other hand, was portrayed negatively in both newspapers, with an emphasis on social sanction due to his rhetoric and behavior on immigration. Despite this, *The Washington Post* occasionally acknowledged Trump's resilience, offering him positive evaluations in terms of social esteem.

Conclusion: The study contributes to the field of discourse analysis and provides practical implications for English Language Teaching (ELT), highlighting the importance of media critical literacy. Integrating appraisal theory in ELT classrooms can enhance students' analytical skills and awareness of media framing, encouraging a deeper understanding of evaluative language in political discourse.

Keywords: Appraisal Analysis, Judgment, Language Awareness, ELT Classrooms

Introduction

The media plays an important role in how the public perceives political figures, particularly during election campaigns. Candidates' portrayal influences voters' opinions and frame their leadership abilities, moral values, and political decisions (Entman, 2021). In the 2024 U.S. presidential election, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, two major newspapers, have big roles in evaluating candidates, such as Joe Biden and Donald Trump, through certain evaluative strategies. By using appraisal theory, particularly judgment of social esteem and social sanction, the study aims to evaluate the language used in the newspapers by dissecting and understanding both candidates' narratives.

Appraisal is one of the fundamental frameworks within Systemic Functional Linguistics that offers insights into how language is used to express attitude (Martin & White, 2005). This theory has been applied in various studies of political discourse to reveal media bias and framing. The main focus of this study was judgment analysis, which encompasses evaluations of human behavior through two primary dimensions: social esteem, which relates to competence, dependability, and leadership, and social sanction, which evaluates moral and ethical conduct (White, 2020). These evaluative judgments are important aspects of media discourse, especially in the context of politics, as they help to shape public perceptions of candidates, highlighting or questioning their competence and ethical integrity (Ekström & Patrona, 2022).

Despite prior research on media portrayals of candidates, a gap remains in analyzing social esteem and social sanction specifically within the context of the U.S. presidential elections, where political polarization heightens the need to understand evaluative language. This study holds significant implications for two key reasons. First, it enriches the field of discourse analysis using appraisal theory, such as judgment, one of the subsystems of attitude, to dissect media coverage polarized by the political environment (Cotter, 2021). Second, it carries practical implications for ELT, fostering critical literacy (McGregor & Lawrence, 2020). By dissecting evaluative language in media, students can develop their



ability to be critical, as one of the most essential skills in today's media-saturated environment (Leung, 2021). By integrating this knowledge in ELT classrooms, learners can be empowered with skills to discern bias and navigate the intricate evaluative strategies used in political reporting, aligning with broader educational goals in media literacy and political awareness.

Objective

This study explores how *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* employed evaluative judgments, specifically, social esteem and social sanction, to shape public perceptions of Joe Biden and Donald Trump during the 2024 presidential election. The central research question guiding this study is: *How do the Washington Post and the New York Times convey judgment through social esteem and social sanction, and what patterns and themes emerge in their portrayal of U.S. presidential candidates?*

The research objective is to identify and analyze the specific aspects of social esteem (normality, capacity, tenacity) and social sanction (veracity, propriety) which reflected in the newspapers' portrayals of the candidates. This study also aims to uncover the evaluative language used by each newspaper and examine how these portrayals reflect broader ideological positioning in media discourse, contributing to framing discourses that shape public perceptions of candidates' competence, moral values, and policy responses.

Literature review

Appraisal Theory and Judgment in Media Discourse

Appraisal theory, a component of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), provides a framework for analyzing how language expresses attitudes, judgments, and engagement. Within this theory, the judgment subsystem focuses on evaluating human behavior through social esteem and social sanction (Martin & White, 2020). This framework is especially relevant in media discourse, where evaluative language can shape readers' perceptions of public figures, particularly during election campaigns.

Media coverage has a big effect on how political leaders view people, especially during election campaigns. The way candidates are portrayed in the media can have a big impact on how voters see them (Bednarek, 2006). This is because the media shapes candidates' morals, leadership skills, and political views in certain ways (Entman, 2021). This study uses appraisal analysis to examine the portrayal of Joe Biden and Donald Trump by The Washington Post and The New York Times during the 2024 election campaign, focusing on the judgment of social esteem and social sanction.

Evaluative Language and Media Framing in Political Discourse

Recent studies show that evaluative language in the media can influence voter perception. Bednarek and Caple (2017) argued that reporting often contains subtle biases, reinforcing the political stances of media outlets. This use of judgmental language has a significant impact on shaping public perceptions of candidates. How candidates are portrayed often depends on perceptions of their competence and moral character, which can directly influence voter opinions (Puschmann, 2019).

Judgments are critical in shaping their public image, especially regarding leadership, dependability, and ability (Hart, 2014). This analysis is particularly great for examining The Washington Post and The New York Times in 2024, as both publications have a long history of influence on public opinion about presidential candidates (Cotter, 2021). Although ideally objective, news outlets often embed subtle ideological biases in coverage, affecting how politicians are evaluated (Leung, 2021). For instance, political reporting may emphasize social sanction or social esteem to different extents, depending on the newspaper's ideological orientation (Ekström and Patrona, 2022).

Media Coverage of Presidential Candidates

Scholarly interest in how media shapes public perceptions of political candidates has grown, particularly with the rise of digital platforms and increased political polarization. Media framing, by highlighting specific traits of candidates, can strongly influence public perception. This influence is particularly pronounced in elections, where candidates' perceived competence, moral character, and leadership impact voter impressions (Entman, 2021). Publications sometimes emphasize issues related to

tone, balance, and framing, all of which shape public perception subtly yet powerfully (Patterson, 2016). Studies on The Washington Post and The New York Times demonstrate how these outlets subtly shape opinions through descriptive language, often guiding perceptions without appearing overtly biased.

In 2022, one of the studies found that coverage has particularly focused on candidates' leadership and moral stances, especially on key issues like healthcare and economic recovery (DeVito, 2022). Language choices, including adjectives and adverbs, can subtly shape the public's view of a candidate's competence and integrity, reflecting the media's underlying influence (Van Dijk, 2013). Although such framing often appears neutral, it can subtly guide readers' perceptions of a candidate's ability to lead. Other researchers argue that these nuanced judgments can have a powerful effect on voters, especially in high-stakes elections where journalistic neutrality is under growing scrutiny (Ridout et al., 2021). Ideological differences between The Washington Post and The New York Times, observing that The Times tends to lean liberal, while The Washington Post often presents a more centrist view. These leanings impact how each outlet assesses candidates' traits, shaping public perceptions in distinct ways.

International Perspectives on Media Judgment and Bias

Comparative studies highlight that appraisal theory is also used globally to examine media bias and framing in political coverage. In contexts outside the United States, evaluative language often reflects cultural expectations and ideological biases. Research in European media has shown that judgmental language could shape political images to reflect the region's unique social and political landscape (Esser et al., 2014). Compared to the research in Asian media, judgmental language is known to shape political images as well (Tiffen et al., 2017). Incorporating these international perspectives has shown the relevance of appraisal theory beyond U.S. political discourse and strengthens the current study's place in the broader field.

Gaps in Current Literature and Contribution of the Study

Despite research on media framing and judgment in political campaigns, there are still limited studies specifically analyzing how The Washington Post and The New York Times use social esteem and social sanction in portraying U.S. presidential candidates. This study addresses this gap by examining judgmental language in these newspapers' coverage of Biden and Trump. By applying appraisal theory to analyze both newspapers, this study aims to reveal how evaluative language reflects broader ideological leanings. Furthermore, these findings can inform ELT, helping students develop media critical literacy skills that allow them to engage more deeply with political media discourse.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses appraisal analysis of attitude with a focus on judgment to explore the research question and to enhance language awareness. In the context of political coverage, where news organizations have a significant influence on how the public views politicians, it is essential to examine judgment in media discourse (Bednarek & Caple, 2017). As part of appraisal theory, judgment studies how people are judged according to social sanction and social esteem (Martin & White, 2005). Appraisal theory breaks down evaluative language into categories like attitude, engagement, and graduation. Judgment is under attitude and is relevant for assessing how people are evaluated according to social esteem and social sanction. These categories enable a systematic analysis of media portrayals, revealing implicit values and biases in news coverage of political figures like Biden and Trump during the 2024 election.

Judgment within appraisal theory provides two primary evaluative categories: social esteem, which assesses qualities like competence and reliability, and social sanction, which addresses moral and ethical behavior (Bednarek & Caple, 2017). In media discourse, these categories shape how the public perceives politicians' skills, integrity, and dependability. Emphasizing social esteem can underscore leadership qualities, while social sanction can highlight ethical considerations, both of which significantly influence voter attitudes and trust (Fairclough, 2013). This study seeks to reveal the ideological stance and framing in the major U.S. online newspapers, particularly The Washington Post and The New York Times. This analysis of evaluative tactics could significantly influence public narratives (Van Dijk, 2013).



Previous studies have highlighted the influence of media narratives on perceptions of political competence and morality. Research indicates that media representations influence voters' perceptions of a candidate's competence and character, more likely to shape public opinion through the use of evaluative language (Entman, 2007). This study uses appraisal analysis to explore the role of evaluative judgments under the attitude of appraisal analysis in the media, enhancing comprehension of how major newspapers voice narratives on candidates in the political landscape. This study's implications go beyond discourse analysis, providing practical applications for ELT classrooms. Critical media literacy enables students to identify media bias and enhance their critical thinking skills (Douglas & Share, 2019). This study integrates appraisal theory into ELT, enhancing both academic discourse and educational practice, and equipping students with the skills to critically analyze evaluative language in media.

Furthermore, although appraisal theory offers significant insights, it is essential to acknowledge potential limitations. Appraisal analysis of political content may be influenced by the researcher's interpretation, potentially leading to bias. This study acknowledges potential constraints and seeks to provide a balanced perspective that considers both the strengths and limitations of appraisal theory in media analysis.

Below is the conceptual framework flow chart that illustrates the purpose of the study. It starts from the materials, which are newspapers of The Washington Post and The New York Times. Then it starts with the background components of appraisal theory and media discourse which branches out to judgment. Judgment has two categories of social esteem and social sanction, which lead to evaluative language for public perception and then media framing.



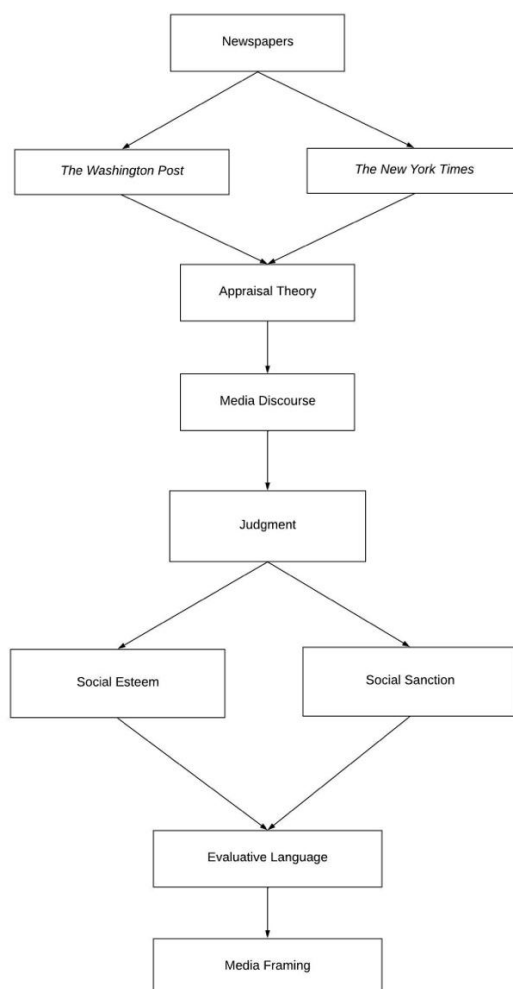


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this study guides the interpretation of media language and its influence on political perceptions. By focusing on social esteem and social sanction, it reveals how language shapes public views of candidates' competence and character. This framework helps uncover patterns in media framing, showing how evaluative language can subtly shape readers' opinions.

Methodology

This study examines how The Washington Post and The New York Times portray presidential candidates using qualitative discourse analysis and appraisal theory. Qualitative discourse analysis helps examine the evaluative language in media coverage, thereby uncovering the ideologies that shape public perception. The study uses judgment under attitude in the appraisal theory to analyze the social values in media portrayals, directly aligning to assess ideological positioning in media discourse.

Data Collection

The articles chosen for this study came from The Washington Post and The New York Times, two major U.S. newspapers, and were published between January and June 2024. This period was picked to show the early stages of the 2024 U.S. presidential election when both Joe Biden and Donald Trump were getting a lot of attention from the media. The reason for choosing these two publications is that they have a lot of viewers and have a lot of power in shaping political conversation. The study focuses on these

publications because of their large readership and significant influence on political discourse in the U.S., where each is known to offer in-depth and sometimes contrasting perspectives on political candidates.

The selection process involved a keyword search using terms such as “presidential election”, “public policy”, “social issues”, and names of the presidential candidates. Articles were chosen based on their relevance to the study's goals, specifically the articles that had evaluative comments or critical language related to candidates' policies, leadership, or personal conduct. This approach ensures that the articles selected are representative of the media discourse during this period and relevant to the study's focus on evaluative language.

Analytical Framework

The study was based on evaluation theory, with a focus on judgment. Judgment is relevant to this study of media portrayal, as it provides an in-depth analysis of social evaluations that are embedded in news coverage of political figures (Martin & White, 2005). Under judgment, there are two types: social esteem and social sanction which could be positive or negative.

Social Esteem: This type of judgment focuses on the competence, reliability, and leadership of the presidential candidates. This evaluation includes the qualities related to the candidate's skills and effectiveness in a professional capacity. For example, "experienced leader" or "highly competent" would be considered as a positive social esteem, while "inexperienced" or "unreliable" would be negative social esteem.

Social Sanction: This type of judgment focuses more on the behavior of the candidates, such as ethics and morality. Examples of positive social sanction are "honest" or "trustworthy", while examples of negative social sanction are "corrupt" or "dishonest". This theory was used to examine how The Washington Post and The New York Times used these types of judgment to change how people thought about Biden and Trump. The study mostly examined judgment on how the media dealt with different points of view when covering the candidates.

With a focus on both social esteem and social sanction, the study aims to uncover how judgment language in the media can contribute to the ideological framing of presidential candidates. This would potentially influence public perceptions.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis used a checklist and coding process to identify judgment phrases in the selected articles from The Washington Post and The New York Times. A checklist was used, which was based on the appraisal theory framework, detailing specific criteria for categorizing language as positive or negative within the social esteem and social sanction. Each article was carefully examined, and judgmental language was identified, whether in a long phrase or a few words. For example, "terrific person" would be social esteem, while "turned his firepower" would be social sanction.

To further enhance descriptive validity, all coding decisions were carefully documented, and detailed notes were kept on how evaluative terms and phrases are categorized. This transparency allows the data to be revisited and ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the source material. By systematically applying the appraisal theory framework, this study ensured that the representation of the presidential candidates in media discourse is captured with accuracy and consistency.

After the analysis of each article for each month on all the presidential candidates, patterns and themes were analyzed across the two newspapers to see how things change over time. This checklist and coding process enabled a comparison of how each newspaper presented different candidates, with an emphasis on differences in their use of social esteem and social sanction.

Results

Evaluative languages in The Washington Post

This section discusses on judgment found in The Washington Post, mainly how the publication used its own opinion to judge Joe Biden and Donald Trump from January to June 2024.

The findings reveal a pattern of how social esteem and social sanction were used by the authors, illustrating the publication's evaluative intent toward each candidate. The table below summarizes the

quantities of the 45 selected excerpts by candidates, judgment categories, and stances. Biden had a more positive judgment in the news than Trump.

Table 1 Frequency of judgment categories in The Washington Post

Judgments in The Washington Post							
Joe Biden				Donald Trump			
Social Esteem		Social Sanction		Social Esteem		Social Sanction	
17		28		15		30	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
15	2	23	5	4	11	0	30

The excerpts below illustrate that The Washington Post often used social esteem to highlight Biden's leadership skills and political knowledge.

Example 1: *"Republicans won what would seem to be a major concession from President Biden on immigration"* (Blake, WP, January 19, 2024). The term "concession" implies Biden's willingness to negotiate, framing him as a flexible and capable leader. This choice of language contributes to a positive image of Biden's competence.

Example 2: *"President Biden clinched the Democratic nomination on Tuesday..."* (Nehamas, WP, March 12, 2024) The word "clinched" reinforces Biden's standing as a decisive leader, strengthening his public image as a trusted figure within his party.

The Washington Post also used negative social esteem and social sanctions on Biden, especially on social issues. Below are the excerpts:

Example 3: *"Republicans are slamming Biden on how he has handled the high number of migrant crossings."* (Rodriguez, WP, February 25, 2024) The phrase "slamming" amplifies criticism of Biden's handling of immigration, questioning his ability to manage pressing issues.

Example 4: *"President Biden's campaign aides have dismissed concerns about"* (Olorunnipa, WP, April 13, 2024). This excerpt suggests that Biden's campaign aides downplayed or ignored the concerns raised. By dismissing them, the aides imply these issues aren't important enough to address seriously, which might seem dismissive or careless. This action hints at a lack of responsiveness or sensitivity to possibly important issues, which could harm public perception.

The Washington Post has given Biden mixed judgments, saying he was praised for being able to compromise but also criticized for what they saw as his flaws. This shows how judgment is applied in a complex way, with both social esteem and social sanction shaping his public image. There are both positive and negative reviews of his leadership, but more on the positive side.

On the other hand, The Washington Post mostly showed negative aspects about Donald Trump. Many stories were about Trump's controversial words and actions, especially when it came to immigration as shown in the excerpts below.

Example 5: *"his 2016 presidential campaign was built on a foundation of targeting immigrants"* (Bump, WP, January 19, 2024). This criticism of Trump's approach to immigration makes Trump look bad morally because it suggests that his campaign was based on unethical tactics. This is a judgment based on a negative social sanction, which highlights a lack of moral integrity with the term "targeting".

Example 6: *"It wasn't just that some of his first words when he announced his candidacy were mean to immigrants by calling them criminals"* (Bump, WP, January 19, 2024). The word "disparaging immigrants" has a strong negative meaning that emphasizes how Trump is seen as breaking moral rules by targeting weak groups. This choice of words shows that you don't agree with Trump's values, making him seem like a candidate who breaks down social harmony by talking about morally dubious issues. Focusing on the moral problems with Trump's policies and speech, these kinds of reviews paint him as a bad leader.

In addition, The Washington Post often used Trump's controversial public comments and legal challenges for negativity.

Example 7: “Trump faces 91 felony counts in four separate cases...” (Parker, WP, February 24, 2024). This excerpt mentions that Trump's legal problems, such as his role in trying to change the results of the 2020 election, have come up again as major issues in his 2024 campaign. This sentence presents Trump as a candidate who has repeatedly broken moral rules, putting him in a socially unacceptable framework. By focusing on his legal problems, The Washington Post not only calls into question Trump's commitment to democratic ideals but also encourages readers to look closely at his integrity, which makes people think even worse things about how he acts.

In conclusion, The Washington Post used both social esteem and social sanction to judge Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Biden got a fairer judgment, with praise for his leadership and criticism for specific policy flaws with more positive than negative. On the other hand, Trump was mostly mentioned negatively through social sanctions, around the topics of moral behavior. This different use of judgment in the news shows how The Washington Post's reporting is influenced by its political views, using judgmental language to shape how people think about both candidates.

Evaluative languages in The New York Times

This section discusses the findings from The New York Times, mainly about how it used judgment when writing about Joe Biden and Donald Trump from January to June 2024 in six months. The way the media talks about things, especially how they show political candidates, shapes how people think about them by emphasizing or minimizing certain traits of leadership, morals, and competence. The New York Times, like The Washington Post, used a mix of social esteem and social sanction through judgment on candidates both positively and negatively. However, the way each candidate was framed and the balance of these judgments were very different. The table below summarizes the quantities of the 45 selected excerpts by candidates, judgment categories, and stances.

Table 2 Frequency of judgment categories in The New York Times

Judgments in The New York Times							
Joe Biden				Donald Trump			
Social Esteem		Social Sanction		Social Esteem		Social Sanction	
22		23		16		29	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
13	9	19	4	4	12	0	29

The New York Times gave Biden positive coverage for social esteem and often mentioned foreign policy. Excerpts below illustrate positive social esteem.

Example 8: “Mr. Biden has characterized aid to Ukraine as a matter of American leadership on the global stage.” (Green, NYT, January 19, 2024) This phrase builds Biden’s image as a global leader, linking him with values of strength and commitment.

Example 9: “Biden has sought to restore America's moral standing after the Trump administration's isolationist policies,” (Rogers & Kanno-Youngs, NYT, March 5, 2024) the term “restore” frames Biden as an ethical leader committed to global engagement.

But, similarly to The Washington Post, The New York Times also has negative judgments about Biden, mostly about how he dealt with domestic problems in the excerpt below.

Example 10: “Republicans have criticized President Biden for how he has handled a large number of migrant crossings.” (Rogers & Kanno-Youngs, NYT, February 28, 2024) The phrase “large number” underscores a perception of crisis, affecting Biden’s image on domestic policy.

Example 11: “As Biden focuses on global issues, domestic critics argue that he has neglected pressing problems at home.” (Kanno-Youngs, NYT, March 12, 2024) The focus on “neglected pressing problems” introduces a social sanction judgment, impacting Biden’s perceived prioritization.

The New York Times, on the other hand, has mostly had negative judgments on Donald Trump, especially social sanctions. The excerpts below show how the newspaper often said negative things about

Trump's words, actions, and behavior, especially about immigration and his combative way of running his campaign.

Example 12: *"dehumanizing language to describe immigrants"* (Gold, NYT, February 24, 2024). This shows that the author has strong morals and doesn't agree with how Trump acts. The New York Times not only criticizes Trump's speech by calling it "dehumanizing," but they also question his morality, making him look like a leader whose values aren't in line with what people expect from public figures. This judgment of social sanction is very strong because it shows how Trump's actions go against societal rules about respecting and honoring people.

Example 13: *"Mr. Trump's campaign appears to be trying to turn 'blood bath' into a catchphrase"* (Gold & Huynh, April 2, 2024). The excerpt signals a strategic move to adopt bold, charged language in campaign messaging. This tactic may bolster Trump's image as a confident, unapologetic leader, resonating with supporters who appreciate assertive rhetoric. However, such aggressive phrasing risks alienating others, sparking concerns about divisiveness in his leadership style. By leveraging provocative language, Trump's campaign effectively sharpens its message, influencing his social standing among different audience segments.

The newspaper also often talked about how Trump acted hostilely toward his political opponents, which added to a negative view of his character. The newspaper's focus on Trump's habit of attacking his opponents instead of working with them shows that he is a leader who values conflict over cooperation, which is not a good reflection of his morals or leadership skills. The excerpts below show how the newspaper shows disapproval of Trump in general.

Example 14: *"Former President Donald J. Trump continued his aggressive attacks on Nikki Haley Saturday,"* (Gold & Ulloa, NYT, February 10, 2024). This adds to the negative views about Trump's character by criticizing his combative and divisive behavior. The word "aggressive" emphasizes a pattern of behavior that is seen as hostile and pointless, which hurts Trump's reputation even more.

Example 15: *"He directly blamed Mr. Biden for a wave of immigrants coming in and killing our citizens at a level we've never seen..."* (Gold, NYT, June 28, 2024) The newspaper's focus on Trump's habit of attacking his opponents instead of working with them shows that he is a leader who values conflict over cooperation, which is not a good reflection of his morals or leadership skills.

To sum up, The New York Times used its editorial discretion in a way that mostly raised Biden's social esteem, especially when it came to foreign policy, while criticizing how he handled domestic problems. Trump, on the other hand, was mostly framed through negative social sanction, with a strong focus on his rhetoric, his confrontational style, and his legal problems. The different ways the newspaper used judgment to talk about both candidates show how The New York Times used judgmental language to change how people think about a candidate's leadership, morals, and skills. The newspaper's coverage of the 2024 U.S. presidential candidates repeated different stories that affected how people viewed them by focusing on Biden's strengths on the international stage and Trump's moral flaws.

Comparative Analysis

Illustrating the quantitative comparison of the two publications mainly shows how these two newspapers are different in tone and frequency of judgment usage. By looking at the frequency, The Washington Post has used more social sanction than social esteem in all the selected excerpts. The New York Times has used a balance of both social esteem and social sanction. A comparison of The Washington Post and The New York Times shows that they framed Biden and Trump similarly and differently. Both newspapers often used positive, factual language about Biden's social standing and experience, especially in foreign policy. The media praised his position on Ukraine, presenting him as a strong global leader. Phrases like "American leadership" and "global responsibility" made Biden seem like a wise, moral leader, which boosted his public image. But as the campaign went on, both papers raised concerns about Biden's handling of domestic issues, especially immigration. Articles like "Republicans assail Biden's inability to stem migrant crossings" (NYT, February 2024) questioned his ability to manage problems at home, balancing his positive international image with worries about his effectiveness domestically.

In contrast, both newspapers mostly had negative views about Trump through the use of social sanctions. Trump's language on issues like immigration was frequently seen as morally troubling. Headlines such as "Trump's inflammatory rhetoric targets immigrants" (NYT, February 2024) and "Trump continues his attacks, rooted in a foundation of division" (WP, January 2024) reflected strong moral criticism of his divisive rhetoric. However, a difference between the two media outlets was in their portrayal of Trump's toughness. While The New York Times consistently criticized him, The Washington Post sometimes acknowledged his persistence, such as in "Trump's tenacity in facing legal challenges" (WP, March 2024). This slight recognition of his resilience was limited to his legal challenges and did not overshadow his generally negative portrayal.

The political leanings of these newspapers may have influenced their judgments. The New York Times, known for its liberal stance, portrayed Trump negatively, leaving little room for positive assessments. The Washington Post took a more moderate stance, showing Trump's low social standing but recognizing his resilience in specific contexts. Both newspapers also criticized Biden, especially on domestic issues, while consistently condemning Trump's rhetoric and actions. Language choices, such as adverbs like "relentlessly" for Trump or adjectives like "effective" for Biden, subtly shaped readers' perceptions of the candidates.

A temporal analysis indicates changes in evaluative language over time, especially about campaign developments. In early 2024, both newspapers emphasized Biden's foreign policy achievements; however, as immigration issues emerged, the coverage transitioned to a more critical domestic perspective. Trump's legal challenges continued to be a primary focus, intensifying with the advancement of court cases.

Practical Application of Appraisal Theory

This study demonstrates appraisal theory in analyzing media bias, with judgment of social esteem and social sanction. For example, terms like "resilience" (WP) for Trump and "leadership" (NYT) for Biden provide insight into each publication's editorial stance. This framework highlights how the use of language could influence public perception, shaping political narratives in ways that align with each publication's ideological leanings. In summary, both The Washington Post and The New York Times shaped public perception through evaluative language, but differences in tone and frequency indicate editorial biases. The use of appraisal theory in this analysis demonstrates the power of media discourse in influencing the political landscape, with implications for understanding the media's role in shaping electoral narratives.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

A close study of The Washington Post and The New York Times shows clear trends in how these two major U.S. newspapers used judgment, focusing on social esteem and social sanction, to frame Joe Biden and Donald Trump in the first half of 2024 for six months. Both newspapers constantly used Biden's social esteem to highlight his leadership experience and skills, especially in foreign policy. However, as the campaign progressed, both newspapers illustrated judgment on Biden's age and how he dealt with domestic problems, especially immigration, which led to more negative judgments based on social sanctions. This evolving portrayal of Biden suggests that his perceived competence is selective and influenced by the context of either foreign or domestic issues, which could impact public confidence in his leadership as a whole.

In contrast, both newspapers have mostly negative judgments on Trump, with a clear focus on social sanction. His language and actions, especially about immigration, were always seen as morally questionable. This persistent focus on social sanction likely reinforces public skepticism about Trump's moral integrity and respect for social norms, with potentially lasting effects on his public image.

As a result, both newspapers have unique editorial approaches. The Washington Post sometimes recognized Trump's resilience, but The New York Times always took a negative view of him, mainly focusing on his moral behavior and conduct. This variation highlights how editorial leanings may contribute to the complexity or rigidity of a candidate's portrayal, ultimately shaping public perception differently across news audiences.

Implications for Media Bias and Political Discourse

The findings reveal how media bias shapes the political landscape during presidential elections. Coverage of Biden shows a shift from praise for his foreign policy experience to critiques of his handling of domestic issues, reflecting the media's responsiveness to changing policies and public sentiment. This shift suggests that both newspapers adapt their portrayals as new contexts emerge, showing that media coverage is not fixed but evolves alongside political developments.

In contrast, Trump's coverage largely focuses on social sanction, emphasizing moral judgments around his rhetoric and legal challenges. Persistent critiques of his ethics and actions paint him as a candidate who defies expected social norms, potentially cementing a negative view of his character over time.

The Washington Post's occasional acknowledgment of Trump's resilience offers a more nuanced view than The New York Times, which maintains a consistently critical stance. This difference highlights each outlet's unique approach to framing candidates, with The Washington Post showing some balance against The New York Times' more uniform critique. These variations in coverage contribute distinctively to public discourse, influencing political polarization and shaping public trust in each media source.

Relevance to Appraisal Theory and Discourse Analysis

This study's application of appraisal theory, with a focus on social esteem and social sanction, provides valuable insights into how evaluative language in media discourse affects political perceptions. The shift in Biden's portrayal from social esteem to social sanction reflects the media's ability to adapt appraisal frameworks as narratives evolve, highlighting appraisal theory's flexibility in capturing nuanced, time-sensitive portrayals. For Trump, the consistent focus on social sanction underscores how appraisal theory can reveal the media's use of moral judgment to question a candidate's integrity. This pattern demonstrates how appraisal analysis can go beyond reporting to evaluate a candidate's ethical standing, shaping political figures through a moral lens, and providing a deeper understanding of media bias in discourse analysis.

Implications for ELT Classrooms

The findings have practical implications for ELT and media literacy education. By using appraisal theory, students can learn to recognize how media coverage employs evaluative language to shape perceptions of public figures. For example, examining how the authors from The Washington Post praise Biden's foreign policy or how the authors from The New York Times criticize Trump's rhetoric can help students identify judgmental language and its influence on public opinion.

ELT classroom activities might include analyzing articles to categorize social esteem and social sanction judgments or exploring specific adjectives, adverbs, and phrasing that subtly influence readers' perspectives. This critical approach teaches students skills to question bias in media, fostering analytical thinking and enhancing cultural and critical literacy. Appraisal analysis in ELT classrooms also supports language acquisition by providing real-world examples that make learning both practical and relevant.

Limitations

While this study provides insights into judgments under appraisal analysis, it also has limitations. Focusing only on the two newspapers, The Washington Post and The New York Times, may restrict the generalizability of the findings, as different portrayals could emerge in outlets with varied ideological perspectives. Both newspapers are based on the East Coast of the U.S., which could mean that coverage may reflect regional biases more specific to that area. Additionally, the six-month timeframe may not capture longer-term shifts in media portrayals, which can vary significantly over an entire election cycle. Recognizing these limitations emphasizes the specific scope of the study and provides context for interpreting its findings within the constraints of the selected sources and period analyzed.

From an ELT point of view, analyzing articles on politics using appraisal analysis might be difficult for language learners. The specific focus on political discourse may limit direct implications in ELT classrooms, though this study can be applied to any classroom materials.

Conclusion

This study examines how The Washington Post and The New York Times framed U.S. presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump during the 2024 election, using appraisal theory to analyze social esteem and social sanction judgments (Martin & White, 2020). The findings reveal that, early in the campaign, both newspapers portrayed Biden positively, emphasizing his leadership experience and competence in international affairs. As the campaign progressed, however, media attention shifted toward concerns over his age and handling of domestic issues, especially immigration, leading to an increase in negative judgments. This shift in evaluative focus highlights how media narratives evolve, responding to changes in public perception and the shifting challenges a candidate faces. In contrast, Trump was predominantly portrayed through negative social sanction judgments, with both media outlets questioning his moral conduct. While The Washington Post occasionally acknowledged his resilience, The New York Times consistently emphasized negative aspects, particularly about his divisive rhetoric and legal issues. These findings demonstrate distinct editorial approaches in the media's evaluative language, illustrating how social esteem and social sanction are selectively applied to influence public opinion about each candidate.

The study underscores the impact of judgmental language on political perception and highlights the significance of social esteem and social sanction in media discourse. By identifying patterns in how language shapes narratives, this research enhances understanding of media bias and framing. These insights contribute to discourse analysis and media studies by showing how language choices influence public opinion in nuanced ways, particularly in politically polarized contexts.

For practical applications, this study's insights into evaluative language offer valuable tools for media studies, political science, and education. In ELT, incorporating appraisal theory can promote critical media literacy, helping students recognize evaluative language and media framing techniques that influence public perception. By using real-world examples, educators can develop students' critical thinking skills, equipping them to approach media with a more discerning eye.

This study is a good basis for future research. Expanding the analysis to other media outlets or extending the time frame to capture long-term changes could generate broader and more in-depth insights into media influence on political perception. Investigating evaluative language in different political contexts, such as international elections, would also enrich the understanding of how media framing varies across cultures.

While this study provides key insights, it is limited to two major U.S. newspapers and focuses only on the initial months (six months) of the 2024 election. Future research could benefit from a wider scope to explore how other sources or longer periods might reveal different patterns in media framing.

In conclusion, this research follows the appraisal theory by demonstrating the critical role of evaluative language in shaping public perceptions of political candidates during the presidential election. By identifying social esteem and social sanction judgments in media discourse, this study shows how appraisal theory can be used to uncover media bias and framing, providing a deeper understanding of the language used to construct political narratives. This contribution underscores the importance of appraisal theory and discourse analysis in revealing the ways media shapes public perception, highlighting the ongoing relevance of these frameworks in analyzing political discourse.

Recommendation

This study suggests several areas for future research to deepen the understanding of media discourse and its implications.

- **Expand the scope of the study:** Future research can include media outlets beyond two major outlets The Washington Post and The New York Times. For example, having regional newspapers from the Midwest and West Coast might provide a better understanding of how different areas of the U.S. would have different media biases on candidates. The Washington Post and The New York Times are both major newspapers on the East Coast.

- **Expand the time frame:** This study examined the articles over six months, mainly on the top candidates at that time. Future research could expand the time frame to see the trends, especially when it is closer to election day.
- **Study different contexts:** Future research could use this appraisal analysis in non-U.S. contexts in a political landscape to compare non-U.S. media portrayals with the U.S. study. A comparative study across different countries would show how varying cultural and political landscapes shape media discourse.
- **Link to real-world applications:** Future studies could integrate appraisal theory into ELT curriculum design could promote media literacy among students. A specific curriculum can include analyzing media texts to develop students' understanding of evaluative language and media critical skills. For example, lesson plans could involve dissecting newspaper articles to identify the judgmental language of social esteem and social sanction, whether positive or negative, as well as fostering students' ability to recognize bias and interpret media framing. These activities could empower students to understand media texts more thoughtfully, enhancing both their language proficiency and media literacy.
- **Using technological advancements:** Future research could incorporate automated analysis tools, such as machine learning, to analyze large datasets and identify complex patterns in media framing. By using a machine learning algorithm, human errors are minimized and could provide richer insights.

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