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## Venturing Beyond YouTube: Learning the Language of Appraisal

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# **Venturing Beyond YouTube: Learning the Language of Appraisal**

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*A major function of language is to enable the expression of interpersonal meanings – feelings, opinions, judgements, humour, and so on. Generally, however, this important aspect of language competency is not taught explicitly, possibly because such meanings are so deeply embedded in the culture that even native speakers are not consciously aware of how they employ these subtle resources. Drawing on the tools provided by appraisal theory, the paper considers the interpersonal demands made on English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) students as they learn to write responses to popular media texts, in this case, Summer Heights High. While recognising the value of the informal give-and-take of adolescent online banter in such environments as YouTube and MySpace, ultimately students need to deal with the demands of more formal review writing in school. It proposes that students can make that transition with explicit guidance by teachers in using the kinds of evaluative language that is valued in the academic community*

## **Introduction**

One aspect of language that often troubles EAL/D learners is the interpersonal dimension: how to provide an opinion, how to share feelings, how to take a stance, and so on. The interpersonal is deeply rooted in culture and values and as such, is generally felt not to be amenable to explicit teaching. Recently, however, there has been considerable interest among researchers regarding the nature of such interpersonal choices (Coffin, 1997; Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Macken-Horarik & Martin, 2003; White, 2005, 2008). Appraisal

theory (Martin & White, 2005), for example, provides insights into how we use language to express an attitude, to engage with the listener/reader, and to moderate meanings. This paper will explore how the tools of appraisal can be drawn on to enhance students' understanding and use of interpersonal resources, particularly in school settings.

Certain genres (such as argument, casual conversation, and personal recounts) provide greater opportunities than others to develop interpersonal skills. Here we will be focusing on the response genres, and in particular, the writing of reviews. In this case, we will be considering reviews of a television 'mockumentary' series, *Summer Heights High*, which parodies the everyday lives of students and teachers at a suburban high school.

When we teach students to write reviews, we often focus on typical stages such as background, synopsis and comment. They are often at a loss, however, as to *what* to comment on and *how*. Providing model texts from expert reviewers does not help as they are generally too sophisticated and linguistically demanding. An alternative is to start with the world which our students inhabit – the internet. Accompanying the video clips of *Summer Heights High* on YouTube are hundreds of responses from viewers. They are generally brief and often very blunt but they are useful in that they show young people engaging animatedly with the series and with each other in ways that we do not observe in more formal contexts. An analysis of these responses revealed that while the writers commented on a variety of aspects relating to the series (the 'what') their linguistic resources were very limited (the 'how'). Further internet explorations led to the writers of blogs. These blogs provided more extended responses, often written by enthusiasts or by students. The bloggers' views often stimulated lengthy exchanges about the merits of the series. The bloggers touched on a greater variety of aspects in their evaluation of the show and their command of more subtle linguistic resources was much stronger. In addition to the YouTubers and bloggers, a number of online expert reviews were also analysed. These ranged in quality from blurbs announcing the screening of the series through to scholarly opinion pieces. These reviews provided an indication of aspects that could be talked about when reviewing, many of which required some technical knowledge (e.g. casting, editing, lighting). They also used language which sometimes bordered on the pompous, though sometimes provided

useful models of evaluative language to which more advanced students might aspire.

This paper is suggesting that, in selecting examples of reviews for model texts, it might be useful:

- to acknowledge the vibrancy of spontaneous responses (such as on YouTube and MySpace), to recognise the range of aspects covered in such responses, but to extend this range and the language used to express opinions;
- to refer to selected expert reviews in order to help students identify a wider variety of aspects open to evaluation and to investigate the language used to critique them (though some might be inaccessible);
- to use model texts from the blogs to mediate between the limited YouTube responses and the relatively remote expert reviews.

These relationships can be illustrated as in Figure 1.

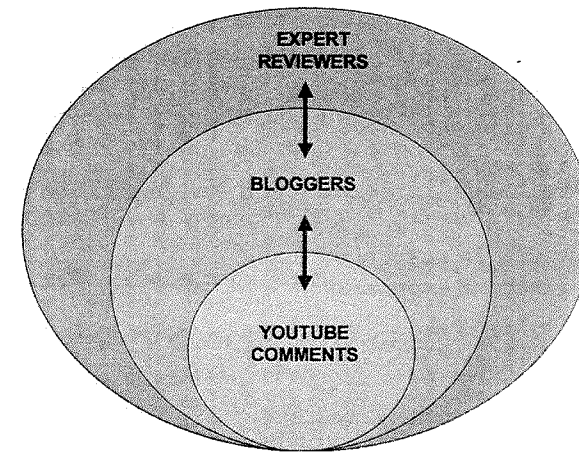


Figure 1: The online discourse communities

In all, some 250 YouTube postings, 56 blogs entries and associated responses, and eighteen professional reviews of *Summer Heights High* were analysed using appraisal theory in order to identify the language used by each of these groups to respond to the series. Here we will focus on only one aspect of appraisal theory:

attitude. Figure 2 illustrates the kinds of choices available in the expression of attitudes.

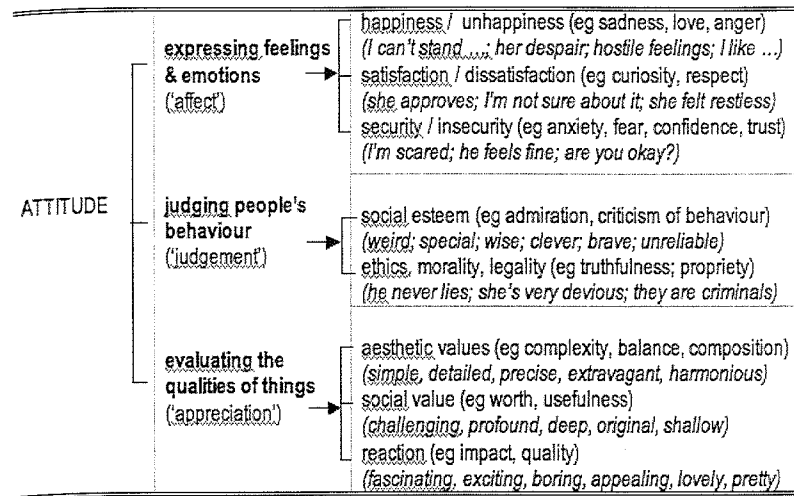


Figure 2: The Attitude Network (adapted from Martin & White, 2005)

In investigating attitudes, we can look at such things as the expression of feelings and emotion, judgements of human behaviour, and the evaluation of the qualities of things. We can ask such questions as:

- Who is expressing the attitude? (e.g. the author? someone else?)
- Who or what is the target of the attitude?
- How is the attitude expressed?
- Is the attitude positive or negative?
- Is it directly stated or indirectly implied?

In analysing, for example, sentences such as:

- I abhor his posturing.*
- His character observations are so freakingly funny.*
- Keiren never gets into trouble.*
- Times reviewer Andrew Billen writes that the mockumentary style is 20 years old.*

we can develop the following table:

WHO IS EXPRESSING THE ATTITUDE?	TARGET OF ATTITUDE (WHO OR WHAT?)	EXPRESSION OF ATTITUDE (HOW?)	POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?	DIRECTLY STATED OR INDIRECTLY IMPLIED?
a) Reviewer	'his posturing'	'I abhor' (Affect)	negative	directly stated
b) YouTube viewer	'his character observations' (quality of thing)	'freakingly funny' (Appreciation: reaction)	positive	directly stated
c) Blogger	teachers' behaviour (moral standards)	'Keiren never gets into trouble' (Judgement)	negative	indirectly implied
d) Times reviewer (cited)	'the mockumentary style' (quality of thing)	'20 years old' (Appreciation)	negative	indirectly implied

Table 1: Analysis of Attitudes

When such analyses are undertaken, we are eventually able to identify the kinds of things that are evaluated ('what') and the ways in which they are evaluated ('how'). We can also see whether the evaluation is positive or negative and whether the evaluation is directly stated or indirectly implied. Illustrative samples have been provided below from the YouTube postings, blogs and professional reviews to exemplify the kinds of interpersonal meanings being constructed in each.

### Expressing feelings ('affect')

When we look at the YouTube postings, we notice a great number of emotional responses, both positive and negative, are often heightened by the use of intensifiers (*definitely*), highly graded lexis (*hate*), or emphatic punctuation.

*I LUV SUMMER HEIGHTS HIGH!!!!!!*  
*i ♥ Jonah*  
*Ofa is cool lol. I envy her cuz she hangs out with Jonah and LEON*  
*i f\*ken hate keiren*  
*I definitely felt bad for Jonah, because the teacher took it waaaay too far*

The bloggers also expressed feelings, but rather than spontaneous bursts of emotion, these were often more considered and elaborated. Feelings are often nominalised (*tenderness, sadness, happiness*) – a strategy for ‘distancing’ the emotion and allowing for expansion (*some real tenderness, pure and innocent happiness*). Notice also the restrained *twinge of sadness* (a nominalisation of degree).

*Towards the end I was starting to really feel for Jonah. I especially loved the storyline with him and his English teacher. Some real tenderness and understanding bubbling under there and even though it's all fictional I felt a twinge of sadness for him.*

*Every episode will put every single viewer into a state of pure and innocent happiness.*

In addition, the reviewers allowed themselves an emotional response, but rather than positioning themselves as the source of the emotion, they often identified the feeling as a reaction to something else, in this case *Summer Heights High*. This is another distancing strategy, on the borderline between expressing feelings (affect) and evaluating something (appreciation). Again the feeling has been nominalised (*poignant moments*).

*Summer Heights High is highly entertaining and also has some very poignant moments, particularly relating to Jonah.*

### Judging human behaviour (‘judgement’)

We can judge behaviour in terms of such criteria as social esteem (e.g. skill, courage, tenacity) or moral/ethical standards (e.g. truthfulness, propriety). These judgements can be positive (admiration) or negative (criticism). In the case of writing reviews, judgement is generally drawn on when evaluating the capacity of the creator of the work in question or in appraising the behaviour of the characters. (The latter is particularly the case in the literary characters studies of secondary school).

In terms of the author’s capacity, the YouTubers acknowledge the skills of Chris Lilley, who created the series:

*rofl chris lilley is one talented man  
Chris Lilley is a genius!!  
he's amazingly talented*

The Blog response below again nominalises Lilley’s skill. Rather than saying ‘Lilley understands teenagers’, the nominal/noun form (*Chris Lilley’s understanding of teenagers*) has been used, allowing for *his understanding* to now be described as *funny* and *disturbingly accurate*. (Note also the way that *disturbingly* introduces further comment).

*Chris Lilley’s understanding of teenagers is both funny and disturbingly accurate*

The reviewers are generally more circumspect in their admiration of Lilley’s talents. Below, the praise is relative (Lilley is only perceived as a genius because there is no competition) and is tempered by the use of a modal (*may be*):

*In a local television industry characterised by meretriciousness, intellectual timidity and corporate contempt for viewers, Chris Lilley may be the closest thing to a comedy genius.*

In relation to judgement of the characters, the YouTube contributions are generally to the point, often seeing the characters as ‘real people’:

*Keiran is a fag he does just make sh\*t up.  
keran is a little homo hes retarded*

The bloggers are more expansive in their comments, providing evidence for their opinion, and again, the judgements are nominalised. Instead of using the expected adjective (‘she is rude’), we find the noun *rudeness*, which is then modified as *sugar-tinged*:

*There’s 16-year-old exchange student Ja’mie King, who hails from posh private school Hillwood and has a **knack for preening arrogance** – she tells everyone she’s “the smartest non-Asian in Year 11” – and **sugar-tinged rudeness** – “The buildings are so, kind of, grey?” she says, walking around her new habitat. “Like, no offence.”*

The reviewers tend to treat the characters as constructed (rather than real) and critique them using criteria reflecting the values of the discourse community and a familiarity with its norms, often using intertextual references to similar characters in other shows.

The *strongest* character is the sublimely named drama teacher Greg Gregson, or Mr G as he claims his “adoring” pupils refer to him. Yes, on the surface he is a **cut-out-and-keep camp** drama teacher, indistinguishable from a phalanx of **throwaway Little Britain grotesques**, but he is far closer to David Brent both in **unintentional humour and acerbic self-delusion**.

Such evaluations display a great deal of complexity as they are simultaneously judging the moral and social qualities of the character (judgement), appreciating the character as a fictional creation (appreciation), as well as indirectly appraising the skill of the creator (judgement: capacity).

### Evaluating the qualities of something (‘appreciation’)

The analysis revealed that there were several aspects of the creative work that could be commented on:

- the series in general
- its social message
- technical aspects
- characterization
- dialogue
- performance
- composition (e.g. complexity, balance)
- production values

Some of these will be briefly illustrated.

### ***Appreciation of the creative work***

The reactions, both positive and negative, of the YouTube posters to the series as a whole were predictably brief and clichéd, using high levels of emphasis (including superlatives). The comments reflect values shared by the adolescent sub-culture:

*Its cool and so random lol*  
*One word: CRAP!*  
*it is the funniest thing i have ever seen!!!*  
*it is pucking brilliant*

The bloggers provide more considered comments on the show. In the example below, the evaluation *funny* is then countered by *but with a dark edge*, indicating an appreciation of the complexity of the series:

*very funny but with a dark edge that makes it much more interesting than most things on television at the moment.*

The reviewers use descriptors such as *honest, confronting, controversial, hilarious, absurd, awfully addictive, over-the-top hilarious* and *frequently shocking*, but then proceed to expound on their reactions:

*Hilarious, absurd and frequently shocking Summer Heights High reveals a world where small issues become huge, social groups are important, careers are built, young minds are moulded, hopes are shattered and dreams are realised.*

### ***Appreciation of the social message***

The YouTube kids were very alert to the racist issues raised by the show. Many of them obviously were of Pasifika backgrounds and empathised with Jonah and his gang.

*Is it wrong he takes the piss out of the Maori kids? It is funny, but it seems wrong, stereotyping them all as being dysfunctional, disruptive and illiterate*

*Cum on ppl dis show is not racist. im half islander and heaps of islanders teas dem self man. its calld a joke. eg.. laughn samoans der soooo funny man. der not being racist der jst haven fun. im been readn all des comments about all dis racist shet man. dis show is a classic lmao*

*i reckon there was some kind of message in there though, i'd have to think about that though.*

The bloggers were less emotionally involved, commenting on the devices used to generate the social comment (e.g. humour) and generalizing about the theme using abstractions such as *many important issues, social justice messages, and subtle inequalities*.

*Lilley is bringing many important issues to light with humour - rather than the current trend of making important issues too serious, too boring and too detached from reality.*

*The show is also being studied in high schools across the country, being cited for its underlying social justice messages. Lilley is quite brilliant at showing the subtle inequalities that go on in school like that.*

The Reviewers identified such topics as drugs in school, the developmentally disabled, public versus private schooling, condescension towards the unattractive, and the failure of the student/teacher relationship. In one case the three characters were seen as symbolising the issues of class (Ja'mie), race (Jonah) and gender (Mr G), thereby raising the appraisals to sociocultural abstractions.. Their comments generally involved a consideration of ideological matters and the role of parody:

*He captures some of the wonder and most of the horror of life in the public-school system, a foreign continent of coruscating slang, brutal bullying, profanity, delusional teachers, recalcitrant students, racism, homophobia and crushed innocence. ... While Australian society keeps rationing its limited opportunities on the basis of anything other than merit, the show points out, nothing's ever going to change.*

### ***Appraisal of the construction of the creative work***

Perhaps unexpectedly, there were a few observations from the YouTubers on the show as a literary creation:

*Oh, okay, I'll say one positive thing, the writing is OK (like 5 out of 10 ok)*

Among the bloggers there was some discussion of the nature of the plot, with one being critical of the lack of plot while another comments that it is a 'slice of life' show that doesn't rely on plot:

*This episode is high on laughs but very thin on plot.*

*This isn't about plot, it's about life.*

The reviewers had many more resources to draw on here, given their familiarity with the criteria commonly employed in the

field. They were able to discuss such matters as editing, flow, complexity and balance:

*a great deal of funny material was left on the cutting-room floor because it interfered with the show's rigorous naturalism. But it's a kind of realism built around timing and rhythm that's musical as well as lifelike.*

*The editing process is all about savage carving*

*The show can be read on so many levels, from a belly-laugh at the antics of Jonah to searing insights into the human condition.*

*Like Gervais, Lilley possesses an acute awareness of the precise calculus of comedy and social humiliation.*

*The attention to detail in this show makes it a real joy to watch,*

*The way the scenes are broken up with innocuous shots of school lockers or busy playgrounds resemble The Office's use of photocopiers and the humdrum grumbling silence of a busy office.*

### ***Appreciation of character development***

Another aspect that is commonly appraised in reviews is how well the writer has designed the characters. This is not ignored by the YouTubers:

*His character observations are so freakingly funny*

The bloggers also noted the degree of authenticity with which the characters were drawn, often commenting on how well the depictions accorded with their own experience:

*Summer Heights High is a very accurate depiction of a typical high school. Jonah is so funny and his delinquent behaviour is so accurate. The reactions of teachers to him and his comments toward them couldnt be more real! i also love mr g! he is amazing. so funny and i know a teacher just like him!!*

*I went to school with girls like Jamie. That fight on last week's episode? I HAD that fight in Year 11. I know kids like Jonah. The drama teacher? We all had that teacher (though probably not as extreme) Its just so true to life and Australian schools. God, its brilliant.*

While some reviewers dismissed Lilley's characters as derivative, pale imitations of those created by Ricky Gervais and other British comedy writers, others also applauded the way in which Lilley's characters were believable and provoked empathy:

*All three characters are compelling. Jonah is as tragic as he is comic, displaying a real desire to learn to read but at the same time despising the system that makes him feel stupid.*

*such a fantastically flawless and accurate depiction of personalities*

### ***Appreciation of dialogue***

The art of the script writer is commonly a target of appraisal on the part of professional reviewers. Surprisingly, the YouTubers also regularly singled out bits of dialogue that particularly appealed to them and shared them with their fellow viewers. Sometimes they simply indicated the point in the video where the dialogue occurs. While such implicitness serves to provoke solidarity, it does not provide opportunities to develop an explicit way of talking about the qualities of the dialogue that they are enjoying.

*'f\*\*k you miss'  
'i beg your pardon jonah ?'  
'i sed puck you miss with a P !!'  
Classic3'26 rofl*

The bloggers and reviewers had less to say about the dialogue, apart from a somewhat lukewarm assessment:

*Times reviewer Andrew Billen writes that "the script had its moments but Lilley needed to cast someone other than himself in the plum parts".*

### ***Appreciation of the performance***

The YouTube viewers had quite a lot to say, both positive and negative, about the quality of the performances:

*lol love the chrecters its just soo funny and brilliantly performed  
r dae ment to be islanders lolz*

*haha da guy dat plays jonah is white yeah*

*yes he's white he just plays as an tonga character OK*

*to me he doesnt really seem much like an islander?...more like a WOG or something? hes not FOB enough I reckon...maybe too oz?*

The bloggers had fewer reservations about the authenticity of the performances:

*the performances from everyone, even the 'extras', are incredibly convincing*

*It's a bit like when you watch Sasha Barron Cohen as Ali G and Borat you forget this is the same person playing all 3 characters. He competley emerses himself in these characters*

*he is so accomplished that you look at each of his characters on screen wondering how he could play them so convincingly.*

The reviewers similarly praised the high standards set by the 'many young actors and actresses', including 'several disabled children'.

*Setting, support cast and production were also excellent.*

*Lilley flits among them effortlessly; at times it's difficult to believe all three characters are played by the one person.*

### **Conclusion**

The tools provided by appraisal theory have allowed us to investigate what kinds of things students can comment on when writing reviews (the 'what'), such as the feelings they experienced, aspects of human behaviour (e.g. capacity of the creator, moral behaviour of the characters) and the qualities of the work being reviewed (e.g. the impact, social value, characterisation, dialogue, performance, and composition). We have also seen how learners might talk about such things (the 'how'), using the language of appraisal (affect, judgement and appreciation) to critique in both positive and negative terms.



It was notable that young people in the YouTube environment, many of whom were of non-English speaking backgrounds, engaged in dynamic discussion around the series and that they commented on most of the aspects identified by more experienced reviewers as targets of evaluation. Less developed, however, were their resources for evaluating those features. In this respect, the reviews written by the bloggers provided models that were closer to the experience of the YouTube participants. The reviews written by those with expertise in the field were generally inaccessible, though they did point to a wider range of features that could be evaluated and they provided glimpses of kinds of linguistic resources that are valued in the academic community.

The YouTube emphasis on affective involvement is something to be nurtured. However, it is important to be able to move beyond the emotions and critically appraise the work in a more objective way. One area open to critique is the skill of the author or the behaviour of the characters. These aspects of judgement, however, are relatively limited. It is the realm of appreciation that comes into greater play in reviews, where the work in question is appraised from a variety of perspectives, the reaction it provokes, its aesthetic qualities, its social value, its technical achievements, and so on.

Obviously, the approach described above would not be appropriate nor possible to implement with all students, let alone all EAL/D learners. It would depend on the type of creative work being reviewed, the availability of a range of model reviews, the age and proficiency level of the students and the time available. However the following principles would generally apply:

- it is possible and productive to explicitly teach interpersonal uses of language;
- the appraisal framework provides useful tools to identify different types of interpersonal linguistic resources;
- students need to be encouraged to have an emotional involvement but need also to be able to distance themselves, moving towards greater generalization and abstraction;
- in responding to creative works, students need help in identifying the various features that can be appraised;

- the language used by more experienced reviewers to appraise such features needs to be modelled, drawing on criteria that reflect the norms of the community;
- students need to be taught how to make both positive and negative evaluations as well as to moderate their opinions by boosting (*utterly brilliant*) and down-toning them (*somewhat appealing*), introducing subtleties and nuances and shades of grey;
- in the first instance the whole class needs to focus on a shared creative work before moving on to working independently on reviews of self-selected works.

As teachers, we need to ensure that students have control over such interpersonal resources so that they can more fully participate in the discourses valued in schooling. In some cases, the teacher might undertake an analysis of relevant reviews and share the findings with the students, providing information on what to talk about and useful models of evaluative language. In other cases, the students themselves might participate in a collaborative analysis of the interpersonal meanings in a text, perhaps using an adaptation of Table 1. Students can be guided to compare and contrast how different reviewers value the work in question and to observe how reviewers provide evidence to support their opinions. Through such analysis, students are made aware of what is valued in the discourse community and the ways in which language is used to express such values.

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