

Attitudinal Stance towards COVID-19 Pandemic: An appraisal analysis of the Jakarta Post Editorials

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Abstract

This study examines the attitudinal stance of The Jakarta Post editorials about COVID-19 by applying Martin and White's appraisal system. The analysis of fifty editorial texts indicated that 70 % of negative assessments towards the government exceeded the positive ones. The illustrative judgment realisations for negative assessments are depicted by condemning government behaviour due to the government's failure in public communication, inconsistency in social distancing regulation, prioritisation of the economy over health, and mismanagement of social aid. The study suggests that the Indonesian government may learn from the negative judgments and cope with the uncertainties for projecting future COVID-19 risks.

Keywords: appraisal, covid-19, editorials, judgment

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1.0 Introduction

Given the rapid spread of COVID-19 and its severe impacts on human health, mass media have been powerful agents in disseminating rapid information on COVID-19 across the globe (Mejia et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2020). In this regard, media research is essential as one of the sources of information, particularly in the context of an ongoing crisis (Olsson & Nord, 2015), in order to examine how media discourses on infectious disease implicitly or explicitly instruct the readers on how to behave in order to manage and minimize risks (Collinson et al., 2015). Through their particular language use, media texts can influence readers toward those reported or discussed in the texts (Van Dijk, 2009). For this reason, it needs to observe how the media evaluate COVID-19-related issues to the public and posit their attitudinal stance, whether the media are more neutral and objective in presenting information on COVID-19 to society or implicitly persuade the readers to act or adopt the position of the media in viewing COVID-19 pandemic.

Attitudinal stances have drawn scholarly attention in media discourse studies. Some previous studies, particularly on newspapers, are reviewed as follows. Feng (2017) investigated the political stance of four major Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong on the reports of the Occupy Central Movement by using an appraisal system and found supportive, through neutral, antipathic attitudes towards the event. Jakaza (2019) found a positive appreciation of the media towards the Zimbabwean government's constitution on various language-related policies by employing an appraisal framework. Makki (2020) examined the role of culture in the construction of news values in Iranian crime news reports and found positive assessments of the police force and their actions. Puspita and Pranoto (2021) investigated the attitude of Japanese newspapers in narrating disasters and found newspapers' tendency to construe the evaluation toward the events or phenomena rather than revealing the feelings or emotions experienced by the emoter(s). While the existing studies have provided insights into the research on attitudes in newspaper discourse, such as on political, criminal, and racist issues in some

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other countries, the newspaper's attitude towards issues during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesian context is relatively under-examined.

Provisionally, the dominant opinions about current news or events are conveyed in newspaper editorials (Van Dijk, 1988). The editors try to interpret the news articles while implicitly constructing the reality from a particular point of view for readers (Jaworski & Galasinski, 2002). In other words, editorials may reflect the attitudinal stance of newspapers towards issues presented. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how linguistic resources can be employed to mediate the attitudinal stance on the newspaper discourse by analysing editorial texts in *The Jakarta Post*, a leading national newspaper in Indonesia. To fill the gap of research on the newspaper's attitude towards health disaster issues, the objective of this study is to examine the attitudinal stance of *The Jakarta Post* editorials on COVID-19 news coverage in Indonesia through the evaluative language used by the writers of editorials by applying appraisal system (Martin & White, 2005).

2.0 Literature Review

The following part provides an overview of concepts and linguistic theory relevant to the study. It reviews the power and stance in media discourse and the appraisal system.

2.1 Power and Stance in Media Discourse

Language represents social realities and contributes to the production and reproduction of social reality in social life (Richardson, 2007). As for media, language is used to inform an event or argue for or against social phenomenon. This language function refers to social action, which has the power of language used to control or influence people. Power shows interactions between or among unequal encounters, that language choice is created and constrained by certain situations of social power, e.g., the use of ideological ideas in media texts (Fairclough, 2001).

Journalistic language has social effects through its power to shape issues and public discourse to reinforce a system of beliefs (Van Dijk, 2006). Journalists or editors construct their voices towards ideas, people, or objects as it also means taking their stance. Stance means evaluating attitude, feeling, or viewpoint about the propositions or entities the speakers or writers talk about (Hunston & Thompson, 2000). Du Bois (2007, p. 139) viewed that "stance has the power to assign value to objects of interest, to position social actors with respect to those objects, to calibrate alignment between stance takers, and to invoke presupposed systems of sociocultural value." Biber et al. (1999) used some terms to define stance as 'personal feelings, attitudes, value judgments, or assessments' (p. 966). Stance, particularly in an editorial, depicts the editors' attitudes or assessment of the proposition or the events. The stance may function to justify power relations in media (Van Dijk, 2009).

2.2 Appraisal system

Within the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994), appraisal system provides a function of interpersonal meaning at the level of discourse semantics to evaluate the use of linguistic features in the texts. The appraisal system deals with "how writers/speakers positively or negatively evaluate entities, happenings, and state-of-affairs with which their texts are concerned" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 2). This system comprises three central semantic systems: attitude, engagement, and graduation. Attitude concerns feelings, that is, the emotional reactions negotiated in a text. Engagement is how values are sourced by playing voices around opinions and by aligning the readers. Graduation refers to the grading of attitudinal values whereby feelings are amplified or hedged in the discourse (Martin & Rose, 2007). The realisations of resources contain polarity – positive and negative meanings.

The attitude system, as a sub-system of appraisal, is divided into three-semantic domains: affect, judgment, and appreciation (Martin & White, 2005). Firstly, affect deals with the expressions of positive or negative feelings towards social phenomenon. Affect can be analysed into four sets relating to un/happiness, dis/inclination, in/security, and dis/satisfaction (Martin & Rose, 2007). With judgment, the attitudes are construed toward people's behaviour or characters mentioned in the texts, such as critics, praise, admiration, condemnation, and other attitudes. Judgment resources are realised into social esteem (personal rewarding behaviours that comply with collective norms in society) and social sanction (how to behave as ruled by the code of conduct of the state and religion otherwise penalties and punishments will comply). Appreciation involves the attitude that construes the evaluations of things or in aesthetics ways. (Martin & White, 2005).

The appraisal resources are presented in Figure 1 below. As seen in the shaded boxes, the focus of this study is the attitudinal judgment in social esteem and social sanction. The realisations of social esteem are categorised into normality, capacity, and tenacity, whereas social sanction involves veracity and propriety. Normality relates to how normal/abnormal one's behaviour. For instance, those who did not wear masks during the COVID-19 outbreak would be recognized as against social esteem. It will be criticised and have negative evaluation on people's character with the term abnormality/unusuality. Capacity relates to the ability of a person being discussed. Tenacity refers to what extent the perseverance, resolution, or brevity of a person has. Social esteem in positive polarity is expressed into admiration, whereas social esteem in negative polarity is categorised as criticism. Social sanction is divided into two kinds of realisations: veracity and propriety. Veracity refers to how un/truthful a person is, and propriety is how un/ethical someone is (Martin & White, 2005, p. 52).

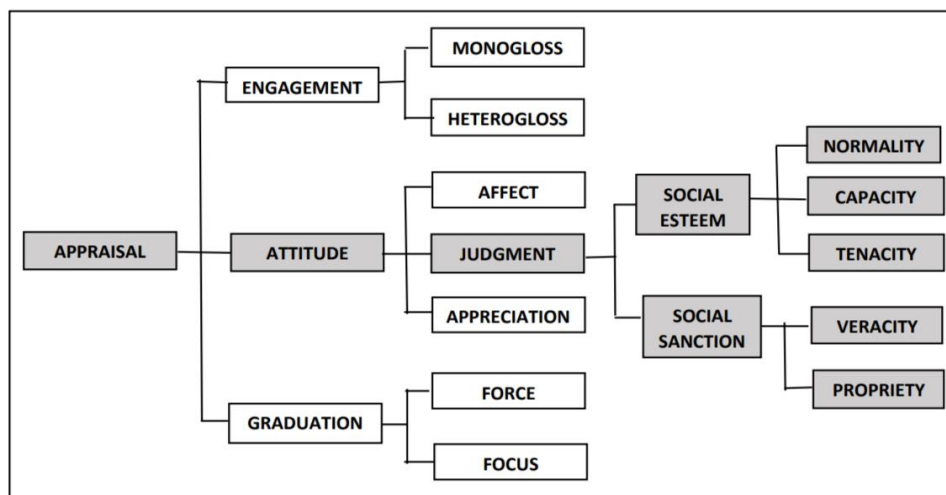


Fig. 1. An overview of appraisal resources
(Source: Martin & White, 2005, p.38, with slight modification)

3.0 Methodology

This study applied a descriptive qualitative method. This method identified and described appraisal devices embedded in editorial texts. The data were editorials taken from the official website of The Jakarta Post, a leading English newspaper in Indonesia. The editorial texts were selected since the COVID-19 pandemic was officially confirmed to have spread to Indonesia on 2 March 2020 until New Normal was executed on 1 June 2020. Fifty editorial texts about COVID-19 were found, accessed, copied, and pasted to files in Microsoft Word format from the website of The Jakarta Post. This corpus includes 25412 tokens (the number of individual words in the text as a useful semantic unit for processing).

The number of hit words and their keywords in context of concordance lines were processed with Antconc 3.5.8 software to determine the themes, the frequent participants, and their behaviour described in the editorial texts. The Concordance line is used to determine a list of words in the texts, give information about where in the text each word occurs and how often it occurs (Sinclair et al., 1991). Based on co-text in concordance analysis, the coding process was manually conducted to determine thematic units (Krippendorff, 2019). The themes found comprise virus-spread control, social aid, the economy, government's communication, and the New Normal. The appraising items, lexis or clauses, are systematically coded and categorised in sub-types of attitudinal judgment resources: normality, capacity, tenacity, veracity, and propriety. The lexis can be nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The positive and negative attitudinal judgment show the attitudinal stance of The Jakarta Post represented in the language use of editorial texts.

4.0 Findings

The analysis results by using Antconc 3.5.8 software found that the frequent participants discussed in the editorial texts are 'government' and 'people'. They were interpretively appraised into sub-types of attitudinal judgment resources: normality, capacity, tenacity, veracity, and propriety as were recapitulated in Table 1.

Table 1. The distribution of judgment realisations towards government and people's behaviour during COVID-19 pandemic

Government				People			
Positive judgment types		Negative judgment types		Positive judgment types		Negative judgment types	
normality	3	abnormal	7	normality	1	abnormal	1
capacity	18	incapacity	16	capacity	13	incapacity	42
tenacity	5	untenacity	4	tenacity	10	untenacity	6
veracity	2	inveracity	8	veracity	0	inveracity	0
propriety	2	impropriety	35	propriety	22	impropriety	5
30		70		46		54	

The findings show the total negative judgments towards the government (70 data), or 70%, exceeded the positive ones (30 data). Among the types of negative judgment, impropriety shows the highest (35 data). This study also found the negative judgment towards people (54 data) outnumbered the positive ones, mostly on the judgment of incapacity (42 data). The positive judgment of capacity (18

data) towards the government is slightly higher than the incapacity (16 data). As for people, the positive judgment of propriety is the highest (22 data).

5.0 Analysis and Discussion

Concerning editorial texts in this study, the recurrent targets of the language of evaluation on the COVID-19 news coverage were characterised into positive and negative stances. The clauses in the texts were analysed into interpersonal meanings related to judgment resources, which are interpreted through the editors' mood choice in terms of adjectives, mental or behavioural process, and mood adjunct within the appraisal system (Martin & White, 2005). The themes found in editorial texts are represented by one extract as follows.

5.1 Positive stances

1 Praising the government for economy rebuilt

Extract 1

Economic growth, although at the lowest level in four years at 5.02 percent in 2019, is both higher [positive judgment: capacity] than the global average and those of regional neighbours and Group of 20 peers. The unemployment rate steadying at about 5 percent shows that the workforce remains productive [positive judgment: capacity] and institutions are expanding and recruiting.

('Herd instinct rules market', *The Jakarta Post*, 4 March 2020).

The editor inscribes authorial reports of the external sources in the form of the statistical data about the rebuilt economy. The lexicalised tenacity *higher* and *productive* indicates the government's efforts to sustain economic growth during the pandemic. They are attributed to positive judgment of government capacity and are oriented to social esteem.

2. Justifying the government's policies on the New Normal

Extract 2

President Joko Widodo has warned that we might see ups and downs in spreading infections even after lifting PSBB measures. Therefore, workplaces need to determine as soon as possible what their new health protocols will be to provide a sense of security [positive judgment: capacity] for both their staff and business partners. Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto has announced health protocol guidelines for businesses for the era of the "new normal".

('Returning to work safely,' *The Jakarta Post*, 26 May 2020)

The editor judges that the government is capable of managing health protocols during the New Normal, as seen in a clause "provide a sense of security". This extract conveys that apart from the contagious virus, business matters should reopen in the New Normal along with health protocol guidelines. The editor promotes positive social esteem towards the government.

3. Praising the people for their cooperation in assisting the front-line health workers

Extract 3

With little guidance [positive judgment: capacity], people have worked together to organize fundraisers, sought medical supplies and equipment, and arranged for the supply of hand washing facilities and disinfectants. Universities and creative [positive judgment: capacity] designers are coming up with new low-cost protective [positive judgment: capacity] equipment for front-line health workers, including those tasked with conducting rapid tests, who are armed with only masks to protect themselves from exposure to the virus

('Humanity Shines,' *The Jakarta Post*, 1 April 2020).

The editor positively evaluates the willingness of people to help each other during pandemic, even with little guidance. Contextually, the lexis *little* includes as the positive evaluation praised for showing moral ethics. *Little* indicates the capacity to overcome and protect themselves in limited condition. Universities and designers are also judged positively by the editors for their innovative protective equipment.

Negative stances

1. Criticizing the government's communication to the public

Extract 4

The government claimed they had already been declared virus-free when leaving China, so it was unnecessary [negative judgment: impropriety] for them to be tested again. But this kind of blind [negative judgment: impropriety] optimism wins nobody's trust, especially from the international community.

('Missing COVID-19 cases', *The Jakarta Post*, 2 March 2020).

The editor uses a metaphor: "This kind of blind optimism wins nobody's trust," as an evaluative style to criticise the government's statement that Indonesia is a virus-free country. The lexis *blind* (adjective) and *unnecessary* (adjunct) indicate judgment resources of impropriety. This claim shows that the government does not follow the ethics of health protocols (negative judgment: impropriety).

2. Criticizing the government's inconsistency in social distancing regulation

Extract 5

We can still hear people embroiled in a debate as to whether they can use ride-hailing apps as a mode of transportation, despite the physical distancing policy. Many others have insisted on leaving Greater Jakarta for their hometowns despite the *mudik* ban. Some also ask whether they can cross regional borders or take flights. Such questions linger as public policy is dogged by a lack of coherence and characterized by flip-flops [negative judgment: incapability]. One day, it is one rule, and the next day, another. One government official's statement contradicts another official's remarks.

(*'We can see the light'*, *The Jakarta Post*, Editorial, 28 April 2020).

As depicted in extract 5, the Indonesian government has a leadership problem in handling COVID-19. The inconsistency of rule implementation confuses the public, particularly on physical distancing policy in the mode of transportation. The government's abrupt reversal policy is realised in the lexis "lack of coherence" and "flip-flops", indicating negative judgment of incapability. The editor also inscribes it in the negative attitudinal assessment in the last clause.

3. Criticizing the government's management of social aid

Extract 6

It is imperative [assessment of obligation, positive judgment: propriety] that the central government and local administrations team up with credible non-government or civil-society organizations to reach out to the target beneficiaries and to deliver social aid in a more transparent way. However, past experiences with government social safety net efforts show that state machinery tends to be so overwhelmingly preoccupied with oversight to prevent the misuse of funds [negative judgment: inveracity] that aid delivery is often delayed or even stopped altogether by excessive bureaucratic rigidities and inertia [negative judgment: impropriety]

(*'We can see the light'*, *The Jakarta Post*, Editorial, 28 April 2020).

In the above extract, there are three judgment resources, among which one is positive, indicating obligation of the central government and local administration in managing social aid, and two negative judgment resources functioning criticism of the government's behaviour and professional ethics. The editor evaluates the government's management of social aid in negative judgment. The detailed assessment of obligation and judgment are shown in the underlined lexis and clauses as the actions should be done in order to prevent misconduct such as misuse of funds, excessive bureaucratic rigidities, and inertia. These misconducts imply social sanction, which concerns the judgment of inveracity and impropriety.

4. Criticizing the government policy on economic priority rather than science or health

Extract 7

Jokowi has put science on the back burner [negative judgment: abnormality]. Throughout his presidency, he has focused instead on turning Indonesia into a robust economic engine, allocating a significant portion of national resources toward strategic programs designed to boost the economy. But the primary guideline in this battle should [assessment of obligation: positive judgment: propriety] be scientific modelling and a set of policy recommendations designed by doctors, epidemiologists, and mathematicians]. To beat the virus and to save lives, the President must listen to scientists [assessment of obligation: positive judgment: propriety].

(*'Jokowi vs the scientist'*, *The Jakarta Post*, Editorial, 8 April 2020)

The editor criticizes the Indonesian president who has always put the primary national program on the economy during his presidency, including the COVID-19 pandemic. The lexis "back burner" indicates that the president has temporarily put COVID-19 research aside. This lexis is categorized as negative judgment of normality. It means how unusual the appraised behaviour is. The editor urges the president to listen to scientists by employing modulation of obligation 'should' and 'must' to beat the virus and to save lives. In this context, 'should' and 'must' include in the judgment resources of propriety as scientists who have privilege and ethics to conduct COVID-19 research program as well as health policy recommendations to the public.

5. Condemning people's disobedience to COVID-19 health protocols

Extract 8

Some people would likely ignore [negative judgment: impropriety] the rules, thinking that a virus should not prevent people from praying at the mosque or having a 'bukber' (iftar dinner) with old friends.

(*'Ramadan during a pandemic'*, *The Jakarta Post*, Editorial, 24 April 2020)

In extract 8, negative assessment is directed to public behaviour in public places for their disobedience with regulations. The lexis "would likely ignore" means to condemn the disobedience of people's behaviour. The lexis is categorised into the negative judgment of impropriety underpinning social sanction.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study found that negative attitudinal stances of The Jakarta Post editors towards the government and people's behaviour during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia exceed the positive ones. The negative stances are indicated by criticizing and condemning government and people behaviour. The editors concern the government's failure to communicate with the public, inconsistency in social distancing regulation, mismanagement of social aid, and economic priority rather than science or health. The negative stances towards government are realised in impropriety resources. As for people, the negative assessments are realised in incapacity resources because of their disobedience to COVID-19 health protocols in public areas that may lead to social sanction.

The positive assessment of the government's behaviour is indicated by praising and justifying government actions in providing a stimulus package for rebuilding the economy and guidelines on the New Normal. These are categorised into social esteem underpinning the attitudinal judgment of capacity. Positive assessment is also given to people for their cooperation in assisting front-line health workers and vulnerable people.

Appraisal analysis contributes to realise judgment resources on the government weakness in leadership and the public vulnerabilities during health crises. Negative evaluation exceeds positive ones because this pandemic was the first severe health crisis experienced by the government. In addition, COVID-19 was neither unpredictable nor unforeseen; it was difficult for policymakers to make effective decisions. These suggest that both government and people are expected to learn from negative judgments, cope with the uncertainties, and increase preparedness for projecting future health crises.

Two limitations in this study cannot be avoided. First, this study only focuses on attitudinal judgment resources and does not draw any attention to engagement and graduation because the focus is on participants behaviour. The appraising is used for only one newspaper because The Jakarta Post is the only English newspaper in Indonesia that regularly has editorial texts. Further research is suggested to compare evaluative meanings in some Indonesian newspaper editorials, English newspapers from different countries, or other newspaper genres like news reports, features, or letters to editors.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The research findings contribute to discourse analysts in discourse semantics and corpus-informed studies in media language research.

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