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Attitudinal Resources of the *Yellowface* (2023) Reviews on Goodreads: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Study

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Abstract

The meaning of the language used in reviews can be evaluated using the attitudinal resources within the appraisal system proposed by Martin & White in 2005. The framework provides the attitude subsystem that helps identify the clauses in the categories of Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation. This research aims to examine the attitudinal resources that occurred in the reviews of the "Yellowface" (2023) novel by Rebecca F. Kuang on the Goodreads website and how the reviewers' attitudes are expressed. This research used a qualitative descriptive method. The data was taken from the Goodreads website based on the top five popular reviews. After analyzing the clauses in the collected data, the researcher then classified them into three categories of attitudinal resources. From the 169 clauses that were identified, the results show that both positive and negative features and all resources occurred in the reviews, with Appreciation being the highest resource that is used, followed by Judgement and Affect. Based on the findings, this research argues that the reviewers tend to evaluate the book's content more than to judge the behavior of the author and the book's characters or to express their emotions concerning the book. As a result, the use of Appreciation might help other readers know the values and qualities of the book.

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Introduction

A book review, as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary, has the meaning of "a descriptive and critical or evaluative account of a book." Oinas & Leppälä (2013), as cited in Wang et al. (2019), stated that book reviews have the purpose of providing information, evaluation, and reflection on the book. The reviewer analyzes the content, such as the plot, characters, or theme, and forms a critical evaluation and personal interpretation of literary works, be it the positive or negative aspect. One of the functions of reviews is giving a guide to others' reading choices; because of that, reviews presume a readership as an act of assisting and giving service to other readers (Driscoll & Sedo, 2019). A book review has a

significant role as a guide to inform other readers about the book's quality and whether it is worth reading or not. We can find book reviews in magazines or newspapers, as they usually provide a particular column for reviews about books. However, as we are in a digital era, the rise of platform-based interactions within digital media culture also influenced the area of online book communities (Helmond, 2015, as cited in Stollfuß, 2023). Anyone can write their own reviews through online media; hence, the quality and characteristics of the reviews may vary based on the individual reviewer (Wang et al., 2019). One of the online book platforms that is widely known is Goodreads.

Goodreads is the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations with its mission "to help readers discover books they love and get more out of reading". It is a platform that provides a place where readers can share their reviews, and it does not connect with book sales directly. Thus, Wang et al. (2019) emphasized that "most of the reviewers focused on the content of books when evaluating them, and few mentioned other characteristics". In Goodreads, there is a space called "Community Reviews" under each book listed on the website that can be accessed by all Goodreads members. It is a place that shows the community's five-star rating for the book in a graph, and also contains the book reviews by other members of the community. There are two categories of the Goodreads' members who access the "Community Reviews" (Ajayamohan, 2023). The first one is the group of "regular, uninformed members, who came to learn about the book." The second one is the group of reviewers who rate the book out of five stars or write a book review to advise the uninformed members on whether to read the book or not. Not only that, to engage their members, Goodreads developed the "Goodreads Choice Awards," in which users could nominate books and vote on them in a variety of categories.

In his article "Do Goodreads really show "Good Reads"?", Ajayamohan (2023) said that a book review has the purpose to give information to the uninformed members about the book's good and bad points, hence it allows them to choose whether they will read the book or not. Each member in Goodreads' "Community Reviews" appraises a book with their own perspective and values. It is more likely that the reviews with more members who agree with the reviewer's perspective will appeal to a majority of the community. Therefore, it will make the reviews more trustworthy. Driscoll & Sedo (2019) argued that the reviews written by the reviewers give researchers opportunities to analyze the discourse forms that emerge.

Based on that knowledge, the popular reviews of "Yellowface" (2023) novel in Goodreads' "Community Reviews" have been chosen as the source data for this research. Awarded as the winner of Best Fiction in 2023, "Yellowface" (2023) by Rebecca F. Kuang tells the story of two young authors, Athena the literary darling and June the nobody. When Athena died in an accident, June decided to steal her manuscript and publish it as her original work. However, controversy and emerging evidence threaten June after the success of the novel.

Reviews from the readers of the book are not merely feedback users; they can be evaluated by the types of attitudes and meanings of the language used to express their sentiments with an appraisal system. Appraisal is developed based on the interpersonal metafunction of systemic functional linguistics. Systemic functional linguistics analyzes how language is used to realize meaning in various social contexts, where the interpersonal metafunction deals with social interaction and the relationship between speakers and listeners or writers and readers (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). As an interpersonal meaning system, appraisal has a main focus on providing exploration, description, and explanation about the way language is intended to evaluate, embrace stances, build textual personalities, and determine positioning and relationships (White, 2015). Martin & White (2005) that appraisal is a language evaluation system used to analyze and describe the language in use with the aim of evaluating texts in context. Martin & Rose (2007) then affirmed that evaluation is the main concern in appraisal, such as the types of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the involvement of

feelings and their intensity, the ways in which values are surmised, and the alignment of readers or listeners. Thus, appraisal involves the social relationship between speaker and listener, or writer and reader, to tell how they feel about something.

The system of appraisal is divided into three types, namely Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation (Martin & White, 2005). Firstly, Attitude describes thoughts, feelings, and emotional reactions, as well as individual character assessments and judgements of things. This subsystem refers to the phrases that are used and their types, such as adjectives and adverbs, that reveal the evaluative stance of the writers or the speakers toward written or spoken content. It encompasses the meaning of the assessment, be it positive or negative, that is being conveyed. The meaning positions the recipients to observe the participants, processes, or situations favorably or unfavorably (Martin & White, 2005). Secondly, Engagement relates to the source of attitudes and voices around opinions in ongoing communicative events. This subsystem focuses on negotiating a text, where the behavior involved is strengthened, and how the values are obtained and the readers are aligned. It is connected to word choices according to the base of the ideology used in a text. It shows the way it is possible to choose an expression of a word that is more suitable than the other choice, so the readers might be able to envision the current phenomenon that is being discussed (Martin & White, 2005). Thirdly, Graduation relates to the phenomenon of judgement, where feelings can be reinforced or obscured. This subsystem is concerned with the up-scale and down-scale of the value and enables the assessment of engagement and attitude to be modified in order to give force and focus. Through the force that is applied, the judgement may be strengthened or weakened. Through the focus that is applied, it is concerned with altering the particularity of the evaluation in a specific-to-generic range; hence, it allows variety (Martin & White, 2005).

According to Martin & White (2005), within attitude, there is a sub-system that is divided into three types: Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation. Affect is connected to the emotive dimension of a person, be it positive or negative feelings, such as joy or sorrow, assured or worried, curious or disinterested. Judgement is related to attitudes and how we see or evaluate people's behavior, be it admiration or criticism, compliment or condemnation. Appreciation is related to how we evaluate things or phenomena in terms of their values and worthiness.

The appraisal system and its significance have been studied and applied to different issues and objects of research. To name a few, the researcher examined the appraisal system in oral presentations about fiction book reviews (Kuswoyo et al., 2022; Sujatna & Kuswoyo, 2023), in argumentative writings (Xinghua & Thompson, 2009; Abdualhussein & Jaber, 2024), in an advertorial (Wihadi & Sujatna, 2021), in a classroom talk (Badklang & Srinon, 2018), in a narrative writing (Fitriati et al., 2018), in news articles (Zhang, 2015; Novita & Sujatna, 2019; Prastikawati, 2021), in a language guideline (Istiningdias et al., 2021), in a travel blog about geo-tourism (Saefullah et al., 2022), and in an academic book review (Wang & An, 2013). In concern of the study of appraisal, Macken-Horarik (2003) in his research has analyzed appraisal systems' role in narrative discourse based on the perspective of writer or reader position. The main purpose of his research is to devise some of the systems that determine how narratives 'go to work' on readers, allowing them to 'feel with' certain characters and judge their actions ethically. The research used the attitudinal resources of Affect and Judgement to analyze the text and found that these resources play roles in building readers' empathy and understanding of the narrative.

Based on that, the researcher tries to discover the role of appraisal systems in reviewer expression in his or her position as a reader. Although there has been research based on reviews by using appraisal system, there are still other areas that have not been discussed. In comparison to earlier research, this analysis examines the attitudinal resources of the appraisal system in online book review on the Goodreads website. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill the gap by using attitudinal resources of the

appraisal system to answer the following questions: 1) How are the attitude subsystems of the appraisal system used to evaluate reader reviews of Kuang's "Yellowface" (2023) on the Goodreads website? 2) How are the reviewers' attitudes expressed in the review of Kuang's "Yellowface" (2023) on the Goodreads website?

Methodology

This research uses a descriptive method with a qualitative approach. Ulfah et al. (2019) have been using descriptive study with a qualitative approach in their research. This technique encompasses a research methodology that focuses on deeply comprehending and interpreting phenomena through detailed narratives and descriptions, with the aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of the nuances and complexities within the subject being discussed (Neergaard et al., 2009). Moleong (2010), as cited in Ulfah et al. (2019), argued that this approach has the purpose of comprehending the phenomenon that is being experienced by the subject of the research, be it how the subject acts, behaves, perceives, or the subject's motivation, et cetera. Descriptive method produces descriptive data in the form of spoken words, writings, and images—rather than numbers—of people and their behavior that can be observed. This approach is directed at the setting and the individual as a whole. Through qualitative research, the researchers examine and analyze things in their natural setting, attempt to make any sense, or interpret the meaning within a phenomenon that people bring in (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007, as cited in Ulfah et al., 2019). The linguistics approach that is used in this study is systemic functional linguistics. This approach examines the use of language in realizing meaning in various social contexts. In order to realize the potential meanings contained in the language, Halliday developed three metafunctions. One of the metafunctions is interpersonal metafunction, which deals with social interaction and the relationship between speakers and listeners or writers and readers, whereas appraisal is developed by this metafunction (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

The data source for this research is the reviews of the novel "Yellowface" (2023) by Kuang on the Goodreads website—which has won the Best Fiction 2023 award, taken on May 30, 2024. Firstly, out of 66,971 reviews, the reviews were chosen based on the top five popular reviews. The reviews that contain a typology of words that show feelings or judgement were then sorted into sentences, words, clauses, or phrases to serve as units of analysis. After that, the researcher identifies and classify these units of analysis based on the attitude subsystem—which are Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation—phenomenon from Martin & White's (2005) appraisal system. Then, the researcher counts the percent of each attitudinal resource that happened in the review. Last, the researcher gives explanations and draw conclusions from the data that has been collected.

Results and Discussion

Based on the top five popular reviews of "Yellowface" (2023) by Kuang on the Goodreads website, there are 169 clauses that are being analysed into the attitudinal resources of the appraisal system by Martin & White (2005). The R in the table stands for Review. The details of the findings can be seen in the table below.

Table 1. The Distribution of Attitudinal Resources

Attitude	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	Total	
	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Percentage
Affect	11	4	3	2	7	27	15,98%
Judgment	13	22	19	7	5	66	39,05%

Attitude	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	Total	
	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Percentage
Appreciation	42	21	4	4	5	76	44,97%
	Total					**169**	**100%**

In Table 1, it shows that Appreciation is the most frequent attitude that appears, which constitutes 44,97%, followed by Judgement with 39,05%, and Affect with 15,98%. The distribution of attitude in "Yellowface" (2023) reviews shows how the reviewers deliver their personal opinion in reviewing the book. Based on the findings, Appreciation is the highest resource used, followed by Judgement and Affect. It indicates that the reviewers tend to give more of their evaluations, be they positive or negative, toward things or events rather than to express their own feelings or judge behavior, Appreciation, as the dominant occurrence, is used to evaluate the book's content so that the readers might know the book's value and quality. The Judgement resource is used to acknowledge the author's and the book's characters behavior, be it to praise or criticize. Affect, as the least resource that occurred, is used to convey the reviewer's affective reaction toward the story of the book.

1. Appreciation

In the reviews, Appreciation is the most dominant resource that can be found. There are 76 occurrences of Appreciation. The classification of the data is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The Distribution of Appreciation

Types of Appreciation	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	Total	
	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Percentage
Positive	18	14	1	3	4	40	52,63%
Negative	24	7	3	1	1	36	47,37%
	Total					**76**	**100%**

In Table 2, of the five reviews, the frequency of positive appreciation, which constitutes 52,63%, is higher than negative appreciation, which is 47,37%. The way appreciation is used to examine and evaluate the value of things and their worthiness indicates its important role in construing the qualities of the things. In terms of book reviews, Appreciation resource is used to describe and give a critical analysis of the content in the book so that other readers might have an insight into the book's relevancy.

The examples of positive appreciation can be seen in the five reviews. The excerpt from Review 1, "It is **fast-paced** and fairly **easy** to get through," shows the reviewer's positive appreciation that the narrative in the book is not hard to follow. The excerpt from Review 2, "There is a **good** deal of nuance in this book about how the commodification of art is an issue," shows the reviewer's positive appreciation of the way the book covers an issue in art. In the excerpt from Review 3, "...making the reader feel **gut-churning** revulsion," the reviewer's "gut-churning" choice of words shows that the intensity of the plot is able to grab the reader's excitement and make them feel a strong reaction. In the excerpt from Review 4, "In an **absurd** (truly absurd if I'm being quite honest haha) turn of events," the reviewer's "absurd" choice of words shows that the turn in the plot is able to make her laugh with its ridiculousness. The

excerpt from Review 5, "I've never read such a **gripping and suspenseful** satire," shows the reviewer's positive appreciation that this book is the first book with such a thrilling satire that meets her expectations among other books that she has read.

The examples of negative appreciation can be seen in the five reviews. The excerpt from Review 1, "It's just such a **nothing** ending," shows that the reviewer did not find the ending of the book satisfying and that it feels dull and has nothing significant that might be able to captivate her. The excerpt from Review 2, "...the last portion feel a bit like **going one step more than needed instead of flowing**," shows that the reviewer found the ending to be quite forced and unnatural when it could have been threaded more carefully. The excerpt from Review 3, "This is **embarrassing** and technically **inaccurate** mimesis all the way down," shows the reviewer's evaluation that the mimesis part when the author inserts her personal experience into the plot without minding the accuracy is embarrassing. The excerpt from Review 4, "This book is both absurd and **unhinged** because so is publishing and the book community," shows that the reviewer equates the plot of the story with the publishing industry, which was depicted as something messed up in the book. It indicates that she found the plotlines to be unbalanced as well. In the excerpt from Review 5, "I found Kuang's Babel to be so painfully **boring and didactic**," the reviewer shows her evaluation toward Kuang's other book, which is "Babel", and finds that the book did not capture her attention with its boring and tedious plot. The reviewer brought up "Babel" as a comparison to "Yellowface".

Appreciation as the most frequent resource that occurred is consistent with the results of the research by Sujatna & Kuswoyo (2023). The research shows that students tend to evaluate the quality of the book's content and the quality of the book as a product. While giving an evaluation about the story and the language used in the book, the students used words such as "recommended," "simple," and "good" to give positive evaluation, and they used words such as "ambiguous," "unclear," and "difficult" to give negative evaluation. Based on the results of this research, the reviewers used positive Appreciation to talk about the plot of the story, the theme, and the issues brought up within the book. These positive reviews show that, most of the time, the story is able to grab the reviewers' attention, it is easy enough to follow, and it is worthwhile to read. However, with a gap of only four numbers, the negative Appreciation given to the plotlines and the theme is also playing a role in helping the readers consider the book's relevance and value. Prastikawati (2021) stated in her research that the results of Appreciation show that the use of this resource may deepen the reader's understanding toward the text.

2. Judgement

Judgement is the second most common resource that occurred in the reviews. There are 66 instances of Judgement. Table 3 shows how the data are classified.

Table 3. The Distribution of Judgement

Types of Judgment	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	Total	
	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Percentage
Positive	4	17	9	1	3	34	51,52%
Negative	9	5	10	6	2	32	48,48%
	Total					**66**	**100%**

In Table 3, of the five reviews, the frequency of positive Judgement, which constitutes 51,52%, is higher than negative Judgement, which is 48,48%. As a parameter that is connected with norms and centers on moral assessments of people's actions, Macken-Horarik (2003) argues that Judgement plays an important role in discerning ethics in narrative and tends to align with the external evaluation of the characters. This suggests that narrative writing often portrays the writers' assessments of the characters within the story.

The examples of positive Judgement can be seen in the five reviews. The excerpt from Review 1, "She's an author who's always been very **open** about putting a lot of herself into her books and it's one of the things that can add to their emotional depth," shows the reviewer's positive Judgement toward the author's capability in building up emotion in the book by utilizing her personal experiences. The excerpt from Review 2, "Kuang is **able** to cover issues without moralizing," shows the reviewer's positive Judgement of the author's ability to deliver the issues in her book without attempting to moralize, so the readers might make their own assumptions. The excerpt from Review 3, "R.F. Kuang is an **intelligent** and **steady-handed** writer," shows the reviewer's positive Judgement toward the author's shrewdness and firmness in her writing. The excerpt from Review 4, "...what Kuang is doing in this book is actually quite **brilliant**," shows the reviewer's positive Judgement of the author's brilliance in her way of composing this book. The excerpt from Review 5, "...but the author **resists** the temptation to paint her as **one-dimensional**," shows that the reviewer found that June's character is not lacking any depth or complexity, as the author tried to portray her to be. The reviewer found herself able to relate to the emotions shown by June and praised her for them.

The examples of negative Judgement can be seen in the five reviews. The excerpt from Review 1, "...the mc is an **unreliable** narrator," shows the reviewer's negative Judgement toward June's, who is the main character, lack of credibility and that she cannot be trusted in telling the story. The excerpt from Review 2, "...she is **never able** to come up with her own ideas," shows the negative reviewer's Judgement toward one of the characters in the book, June, as someone with no capability to conceive her own original ideas in writing. The excerpt from Review 3, "...but a deeply **incurious** writer," shows the reviewer's negative Judgement to criticize the author's behavior in her lack of curiosity to explore outside of her comfort zone. The excerpt from Review 4, "June believes she's the true **minority** and **oppressed** person in all of this," shows the reviewer's negative Judgement toward June's situation and circumstance. The excerpt from Review 5, "June has done something objectively **bad**," shows the reviewer's negative Judgement toward June's improper behavior.

The results of the research by Sujatna & Kuswoyo (2023) show that the students used Judgement to evaluate the author's or the book characters' behavior. The students used words such as "innocence," "brave," and "famous" to give positive evaluation, and they used words such as "hard" and "introvert" to give negative evaluation. Based on the results of this research, positive Judgement used by the reviewers mostly talked about the author's ability and strength in her writing. These positive reviews toward the author give her credibility for her works and might persuade other readers to check out her other books. However, in negative Judgement, the reviewers mostly used it to assess the book's characters and their behavior. These negative reviews of the characters give other readers insight on their roles and depictions in the story. Wang & An (2013) stated in their research that the reason why Judgement occurred less than Appreciation might be because "compared with an evaluation on things, an evaluation on people is more likely to be challenged."

3. Affect

The least frequent resource that can be found in the reviews is Affect, with only 27 instances. Table 4 presents how the data are classified.

Table 4. The Distribution of Affect

Types of Affect	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	Total	
	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Percentage
Positive	6	3	-	2	7	18	66,67%
Negative	5	1	3	-	-	9	33,33%
	Total					**27**	**100%**

In Table 4, of the five reviews, the frequency of positive affect, which constitutes 66,67%, is higher than negative affect, which is 33,33%. According to Macken-Horarik (2003), affect and its usage in narrative text create 'reader empathy' by describing feelings and personal emotions that relate to the personal appraisal of events. This item is effective in conveying feelings or emotions, enabling readers to experience comparable feelings in response to the emotional descriptions in the text.

The examples of positive affect can be seen in the four reviews. The excerpt from Review 1, “I was really **loving** the third act,” shows the reviewer's feelings of happiness toward some parts of the book, which she loves more. The excerpt from Review 2, "I **enjoyed** the nuance here in how it exposes problems from many angles," shows the reviewer's satisfaction with how the nuance is delivered in the book and how it pleased her. The excerpt from Review 4, "I **wholeheartedly** disagree," shows the reviewer's determination and has no hesitation in expressing her feelings of disagreement toward the criticism uttered by others about the book. The excerpt from Review 5, "...everyone I know read this and liked it, so **curiosity** got the better of me," shows the reviewer's interest and inclination to read the book.

The examples of negative affect can be seen in the three reviews. The excerpt from Review 1, "I’m kind of **torn** about yellowface," shows the reviewer's difficulty about her feelings toward the book, whether, personally, the book didn't work for her or, objectively, she's being critical. The excerpt from Review 2, "...and being **disgusted** with her is half the fun," shows the reviewer's distaste toward one of the book's characters, which is June. The excerpt from Review 3, "It is **disappointing** to watch someone technically skilled grind their intellectual curiosity down to a nub via posting and self-obsession," shows the reviewer's dissatisfaction toward the author. It conveys how the author's manner and writing style fail to meet the reviewer's expectations.

Affect as the least resource that occurred is consistent with the results of the research by Wang & An (2013). The research shows that the reviewers rarely talk about their emotions while expressing their views about the book. It might be because "affect is the most subjective among the three subcategories of attitude," and it might result in unprofessionalism to rely heavily on emotions while giving reviews (Wang & An, 2013). In contrast, the results of the research by Prastikawati (2021) show that Affect is the most frequent resource. In news articles, the writers tend to use Affect to convey and manifest the feelings in order for the readers to understand the emotional situation. Based on the results of this research, positive Affect is mostly used by the reviewers to convey the emotional reaction they get when they read the book. It involves the feelings of happiness, inclination, and satisfaction. Although there are negative emotions shown in the reviews, they are not much used by the reviewers. Affect in the reviews can incite other readers to imagine or empathize with the reviewers' feelings toward the book and help them relate to these emotional reactions.

Conclusion

This current research is focused on analyzing the reviews of the novel

"Yellowface" (2023) by Kuang on the Goodreads website by using the attitudinal resources of the appraisal system. This research uses and examines the five reviews based on their rank in popular reviews. It is concerned with the reviewers' attitudes in expressing their evaluation of the book. After analyzing the data, the findings of this research show that all types of attitudinal resources—which are Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation—occurred in the reviews, with Appreciation as the dominant resource that occurred in the reviews with 44,97%, followed by Judgement with 39,05%, and lastly, Affect with 15,98%. Appreciation, with the highest distribution, indicates that the reviewers tend to evaluate the content within the book more and help other readers by giving information about the book's values. The reviewers also used Judgement in their acknowledgement of both the author's and the book's characters behavior. At last, the reviewers rarely used emotive expressions in writing the reviews. It can be concluded that the reviewers focused more on reviewing the qualities of the book, be it the plot, theme, issues, or characters, than on delivering their emotional reactions toward the book. Additionally, both positive and negative characteristics can be found. It suggests that the reviewers try to convey the strengths and weaknesses of the book to the readers. Thus, they may consider whether these evaluations align with their preferences or not so that they can decide if the book is worth reading. However, with the positive characteristic appearing more than the negative one, it can be concluded that the reviewers view that the book has more good quality in it.

This current research only focuses on analyzing the attitudinal resources of the appraisal system. Therefore, for future research, it can be suggested that other researchers apply the graduation items to further analyze book reviews and obtain further understanding. Through graduation, the intensity of the evaluations and attitudinal meanings can be altered or adjusted, and it might influence how these are perceived by the readers. Also, the future research can also apply the corpus method to expand the scope of the reviews that are used as the data, so it will not be limited to 5 reviews only.

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