Governmental Attitudes towards the Development of HK (1984–2022): A Corpus-Based Discourse Study

Chai Ying

College of Foreign Language, Qufu Normal University, China
Email: cy19558699224@126.com

Abstract—This study aims to provide an account of the governmental attitudes of former Hong Kong Governors and the Hong Kong (HKSAR) Chief Executives. Two large corpora have been built to explore the keyword-in-context data and do a linguistic analysis of them. It is argued that combining the methods and theories in critical discourse analysis, appraisal theory, and semantic prosody can generate more illuminating findings concerning attitudes in political discourse.

Keywords—critical discourse analysis, appraisal theory, Semantic prosody, policy addresses, Hong Kong

I. INTRODUCTION

As a city situated in the Southern part of China, Hong Kong has been an integral part of China but was subject to British control after the two Opium Wars [1]. However, the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law stated that Britain should return Hong Kong to China on 1 July 1997. Under Chinese sovereignty, Hong Kong would retain a high degree of autonomy, and its way of life would remain the same for 50 years following the change of sovereignty [2, 3]. It has been more than 25 years since Hong Kong passed from British colonial control to the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 July 1997 and became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. In order to maintain political continuity, some practices of the British Hong Kong era are retained. For example, the practice of giving annual policy addresses is mandated under Article 64 of the Basic Law, requiring the government to "present regular policy addresses to the Council."

The current article proposes a critical discourse analysis in policy addresses (1984–2022) to examine different stances taken by the former British colony and post-colonial Hong Kong. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a branch of linguistics interested in examining power inequality, identity, and ideology [4–6]. Research has shown that stance plays a vital role in CDA [7, 8]. Methodologically, the triangulation research combines semantic prosody, appraisal theory, and critical discourse analysis [9, 10]. It is characterized by the combination of semantic prosody and appraisal theory, developed within Corpus Linguistics (CL) and Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL), respectively. The study combines the methods and theories related to CL, SFL, and CDA. It not only justifies the feasibility of multi-method research in the dynamic social-political contexts through a large corpus but also sheds some light on the research and praxis of CDA [11–13]. This article departs to focus on the following three objectives:

Objective 1: To examine governmental attitudes on development in HKSAR.

Objective 2: To examine governmental attitudes on development in the former British colony.

Objective 3: To explore why there are differences between the former British colony and post-colonial Hong Kong.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study concurs with that "multi-method research, in which the methods are intertwined and often interdependent in the research process [9]." In specific, this research focuses on the research synergy of CL, SFL and CDA [4, 14–16].

A. Stance in Political Discourse Analysis

During the initial few years of the twenty-first century, scholarship in linguistics and related disciplines has witnessed a notable upsurge of interest in stance [17]. Englebretson R supposes that "stance is by no means a monolithic concept [17]. Definitions and conceptions of stance are as broad and varied as the individual backgrounds and interests of the researchers themselves." Stance in political discourse has recently gained currency in academia [18–21]. According to Yan Eureka Ho and Crosthwaite, "The ability of language users, in this case politicians, to articulate and manipulate their stance to achieve certain goals, express their attitudes and display solidarity with/opposition to certain values is a key feature of political discourse [8]." For example, a plethora of studies have used CDA in the textual analysis of political discourses, most of which concern western countries, like how the stance styles vary in the two speeches addressed to the Arab World by two US Presidents [22]. In terms of Chinese circumstances, it focuses on why Chinese leaders exploit quotes culturally while American leaders use them politically and how the stance of the Chinese government is interpreted from Chinese to English [23, 24]. Nonetheless, stancetaking in Hong Kong political discourse has received insufficient attention [14]. Although John Flowerdew's study and S Yan Eureka Ho, P Crosthwaite's study are two exceptions, they were confined to interpreted political discourse [2, 8].

B. Appraisal Theory

The appraisal theory [10], derived from the description of interpersonal meaning in systemic functional linguistics [25] has been applied to the studies of the attitude and stance expressed in various genres of discourse [26]. As an analytical model, Appraisal Theory is the most representative theoretical approach investigating the subjectivity of discourse in recent years. It mainly focuses on the concepts of appraisal, evaluation and stance [27].

Martin and White use Appraisal Theory to categorize stance into three dimensions, namely, attitude, graduation, and engagement [10, 28]. Among them, attitude, which expresses the speaker's or writer's feelings about people or things, is the core of evaluation theory. It comprises affect, judgment and appreciation [10] (See Table 1).

Table 1. Type of attitude [10]

	Type	Definition
Affect	Realis	Un/hapiness
		In/security
		Dis/satisfaction
	Irrealis	Fear
		Desire
Judgment	Social esteem	Normality: How special?
		Capacity: How capable?
		Tenacity: How dependable?
	Social sanction	Veracity: How honest?
		Propriety: How far beyond reproach?
Appreciation	Reaction	Impact: Did it grab me?
		Quality: Did I like it?
	Composition	Balance: Did it hang together?
		Complexity: Was it hard to follow?
	Valuation	Was it worthwhile?

C. Semantic Prosody

The theory of co-selection is one of the most important theories in the field of Neo-Firthian [29–31]. It delves into the complicated relationship among the co-selection of lexis and grammar, the co-selection of lexis and lexis, and the co-selection of patterns and meanings. Also, it provides theoretical and methodological support for phraseological studies. Phraseology as an important discipline in Western language studies is largely attributable to the large number of research studies guided by co-selection theory. Moreover, the notion of extended unit of meaning (also called compound lexical item) should be a model representation of co-selection theory at the operational level [32]. Specifically, semantic prosody is an attitudinal meaning that indicates the speaker's attitude in a specific discourse situation such as "difficult," "threatening" and "reluctant." Semantic rhyme summarizes the function and communicative purpose of the entire unit of meaning [33–35].
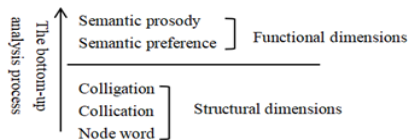

Fig. 1. Extended unite of meaning adapted from Jianzhong [35].

As shown in Fig. 1, which shows further the complicated relationships among the components of the extended unit of meaning. It shows that the five components (node word, collocation, colligation, semantic preference, and semantic prosody) form the formal-functional unity of the extended unit of meaning [36]. Specifically, node word, collocation, and colligation belong to the formal layer (lower one), while semantic preference and semantic prosody belong to the functional layer (upper one). Generally, the extended unit of meaning is a whole, which involves a one-time selection. These components are essentially co-selection relationships. The order of the previous discussion follows a bottom-up approach (from node word to collocation to colligation to semantic preference, and finally to semantic rhyme). This process of abstraction reflects the search or identification of the extended unit of meaning. From another point of view, attitudinal choice determines the semantic choice, which in turn determines the grammatical, collocational, and ideographic choice. The cascading reinforcement of specificity reflects the decision-making process of the extended meaning unit.

D. Critical Discourse Analysis

According to Paul Baker's study, "A weakness of a singular corpus approach to discourse analysis (compared to the qualitative analysis) is that the focus on collocates or other patterns based around word frequencies may mean that in some cases a purely descriptive analysis emerges which does not attempt to provide interpretation, critique or explanation for the patterns found [9]. Nor may such analysis engage with the wider social and historical context beyond the corpus [9]." CDA, however, construes meanings from three levels: text; discourse practice; and sociocultural practice [11]. Traditional CDA approaches are characterized by detailed, manual and top-down analyses of language features. This may cause problems like "what counts as evaluative language and how it is identified and analyzed may vary greatly due to subjective considerations [12]." However, recent research has integrated corpus linguistic techniques, providing statistically driven, bottom-up methods into traditional CDA. There are an increasing number of corpus-based studies on stance in political discourse [37,38].

Drawing upon insights from scholar Paul Baker "neither CDA nor CL needs to be subservient to the other, but that each contributes equally and distinctly to a methodological synergy [4]." This article integrates theories of CL, SFL, and CDA, the thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach to explore the evolution of governmental attitudes towards the development of HK based on a diachronic corpus of policy addresses (1984–2022), with a combination of qualitative and quantitative method.

Specifically, the present research attempts to answer the following interrelated questions：

Question 1: What governmental attitudes towards the development of HK are constructed through these language patterns in policy addresses during the two periods?

Question 2: What governmental attitudes towards the development of HK are constructed through subcategories of attitude in policy addresses during the two periods?

Question 3: What social and historical factors contribute to the construction of governmental attitudes in different periods?

Question 4: How can the combination of CL, SFL, and CDA benefit future studies in political discourse analysis?

I hope this research sheds some light on the application and integration of corpus methodology in discourse analysis. In general, the analytical framework of the current study can be summarized in Fig. 2.
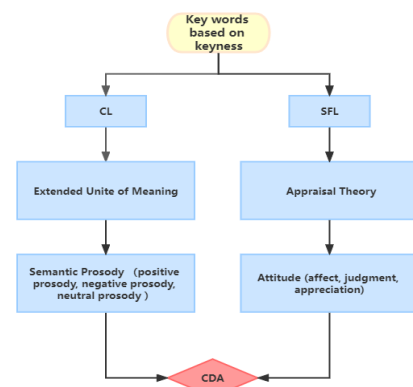

Fig. 2. Flowchart of the analytical framework.

III. Research Methodology

With the help of a crawler tutorial, policy addresses corpora (1984–2021) have been built. As a corpus-analytic tool, AntConc is used for analyzing the most obvious topics/themes to identify the keywords of the two corpora by comparing one corpus with a reference corpus [4]. Keywords refer to words that are statistically more frequently used in one corpus when compared with their use in a secondary or general corpus [39, 40] They can be ranked in descending order in a keyword list based on their keyness by calculating Chi-squared or Log-likelihood. Different statistical measures can be used to measure the strength of collocation [39]. The more their keyness values are, the more statistically significant these keywords are.

This study divides the policy addresses corpora (A+B) (595,561 tokens) into two sub-corpora: Corpus A (1984–1996) (164,175 tokens) and Corpus B (1997–2022) (431,386 tokens). I compare the Corpus A with Corpus A (A+B) and Corpus B, respectively, to produce keyword lists (See Table 2). For the reason of space, I focus on the top 5 nouns to identify the shared topics/themes (If the nouns are not enough for 5, then all of them are listed). The log-likelihood values are used in this study.

Table 2. Keyword list 1

Rank	Freq	Keyness (+)	Keyword (B: B+A)	Freq	Keyness (+)	Keyword (B: A)
1	2409	74.47	development	2409	610.35	development
2	817	44.15	mainland	817	468.99	mainland
3	3147	25.19	government	328	197.41	enterprises
4	1019	25.04	support	1019	194.84	support
5				272	185.89	healthcare

IV. Results

Through comparing different sub-corpora, I have found that the most prominent theme after the return of Hong Kong is development. Through observation and analysis, I found that the frequency of use of development has increased exponentially after the handover (See Fig. 3). In order to provide a solid interpretation and explanation of the findings, this study analyzes collocation, and semantic prosody of selected topic keywords. I chose to particularly focus on the collocates based on both MI score and T-score, with the former representing one type of measure asking how strongly the two words are attracted to each other, and the latter representing the other type asking how much confidence I can have to claim there is some association. Because the grammar is most likely to allow development to occur to the left, I only observed the L1 slot (See Table 3).

Once a concordance line alone is insufficient to identify the theme, an extended reading is needed to look up a larger stretch of text, even the full article. Upon thorough analysis of Corpus A and Corpus B, it becomes evident that the strongest pattern observed in Corpus A is "Hong Kong's economic development," whereas in Corpus B, the strongest pattern is "Our economic development".

The Key Word in Context (KWIC) plays a crucial role as the fundamental basis for conducting research. By employing Em Editor and regular expressions to extract concordance lines, we can observe various collocations such as "Hong Kong's" (2), "countries" (1), "contribution" (1), "role" (1), and "our" (1). Among these, the strongest pattern that emerges is "Hong Kong's economic development". These identified collocations consist of the possessive case + economic development, noun + economic development, and adjectival possessive pronoun + economic development. Importantly, the study reveals that all these collocations exhibit a positive semantic prosody.

Taking "Hong Kong's economic development" as an example, the findings highlight Hong Kong's appreciation for its economic development and demonstrate a proactive approach in addressing challenges and pursuing opportunities for sustained growth. This underscores the proactive attitude of Hong Kong in nurturing its economic development, emphasizing the positive value it places on this aspect and its eagerness to tackle obstacles and seize prospects for continuous advancement.
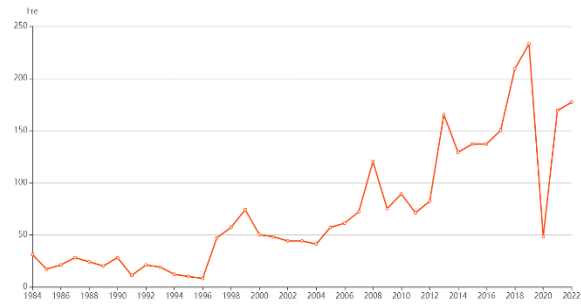

Fig. 3. Visualization of the keyword "development" in the policy addresses (1984–2022).

Table 3. Collocates of development in the slot of L1

Rank	collocates	Frequency	T-score	MI
1	the	102	14.37453	3.79329
2	economic	10	3.50292	5.13472
3	for	9	7.33647	4.24153
4	our	7	6.09774	4.08075
5	further	7	4.06881	6.24688
6	political	6	2.78697	6.0923
7	of	6	11.44234	3.99753
8	constitutional	6	2.98782	7.94405
9	future	6	2.866	4.48462
10	port	5	4.44081	7.15746
11	industrial	4	2.40535	5.79431
12	residential	4	2.21904	7.03716
13	and	4	8.50564	3.59399
14	important	4	2.3034	4.06754
15	democratic	4	1.9863	7.18917
16	this	3	4.15571	3.1329
17	major	3	2.10395	4.08111
18	continued	2	1.34745	4.40489
19	invited	2	1.40022	6.65865
20	healthy	2	1.71798	6.94405

Furthermore, a deeper comprehension of the governmental attitudes on "Hong Kong's economic development" prior to its return can be attained through the utilization of Appraisal theory. For example:

Both sides agreed on the importance of the General

Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to Hong Kong's economic development, and on arrangements for Hong Kong to continue as a member of the Asian Development Bank after 1997. [Affect-Security]

As I said last year, we cannot afford to have Hong Kong's economic development constrained by inadequate airport capacity. [Affect-Dissatisfaction]

Similarly, within corpus B, the strong pattern identified is "our economic development," which appears sixteen times. Out of the total 197 available collocations, only five representative ones are presented here due to space constraints, and they are distributed across L1. Notably, the terms "promoting" (13), "Hong Kong's" (12), "rapid" (10), and "future" (7) are frequently observed in the corpus. These collocations exhibit four types of colligations, including Adjectival possessive pronoun+ economic development, possessive case + economic development, verb + economic development and adjective + economic development. Notably, the semantic preference expressed indicates that Hong Kong's overall prosperity relies on an essential component characterized by inclusivity, societal benefits, and a robust financial market and investment environment. Remarkably, most of these exhibits positive semantic prosody.

Once a concordance line alone is insufficient to identify the theme, an extended reading is needed to look up a larger stretch of text, even the full article.

V. Conclusion

Overall, governmental attitudes made through different approaches, are consistent and in compliance with each other. Each strand can serve as different parts of a triangulation to each other. Using different corpus analytic tools and approaches provides different entry points for the further analysis of the data, thus allowing the analysis of the corpora at different levels [4, 33, 41]. A combination of the methods and theories associated with CL, SFL and CDA can not only present an efficient means to identify and analyze the intricate relations in the changing socio-political contexts [4]. It concurs with the earlier one in revealing that "combinations of approaches are generally more productive than a single approach on its own [9]."

Nevertheless, the current study provides an opportunity to take stock and examine new contexts and directions in critical discourse analysis through the analysis of attitudes and semantic prosodies. This not only provides a theoretical basis for the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, but also provides a reference basis for official documentary expressions.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

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