

Evaluative prosodies in academic quality audit reports: An exploratory study

This paper analyzes the discourse of academic quality audit reports by drawing upon Appraisal Theory (Martin & White 2005). It focuses on the evaluative prosodies in the discourse leading up to the three main components of thereports, namely commendations, affirmations, and recommendations. These reports are prepared by the audit panels formed by the Quality Assurance Council of the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong upon the completion of academic quality audit visits to each of the city's eight publicly-funded tertiary institutions. This paper argues that such evaluative prosodies, or the pattern of use of evaluative language, are strategically employed by the audit panels in an attempt to strike a balance between three needs: (1) to discharge their quality assurance responsibilities with their power vested by the Hong Kong Government through the University Grants Committee; (2) to maintain and/or reinforce a credible ethos for the panels themselves; and (3) to attend to the face wants of the institutions and the stakeholders concerned.

1. Introduction

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government and the University Grants Committee (UGC) place strong emphasis on the quality of the post-secondary education programmes offered by both UGC-funded and non-UGC funded institutions, locally or overseas-based. At present, the quality of these programmes is assured via three different mechanisms: (1) the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of the UGC undertakes the quality assurance work concerning the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered by the eight local UGC-funded institutions through regular audit visits; (2) the quality of the sub-degree programmes offered by the extension arms of these same institutions is assured via a two-step process — the programmes are first self-accredited by the quality assurance unit of the respective institution, followed by a review conducted by the Joint Qualifications Review Committee (JQRC); and (3) the quality of the other programmes offered by local or overseas education providers is assured by a stringent accreditation process undertaken by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) prior to the launching of the programmes. The QAC, the JQRC, and the HKCAAVQ produce, upon the completion of the quality assurance exercise, an audit report, a review report, and an accreditation report, respectively. However, only the audit reports of the UGC-funded institutions are published in full, and only recently have they started publishing the summary accreditation reports prepared by the HKCAAVQ. In response to the increasing demand by the public for transparency in the provision and operation of education programmes, the UGC (2010) demands that the accreditation, review, and audit reports be published. The strengths and weaknesses of the programmes, personnel and institutions will now be made known to the public — the potential students and their parents included. This

group of people will have access to important information when deciding on the most suitable institution and programme for further study. As such, the audit panel's evaluation will probably affect the quality of student intake. The review exercises undertaken by the JQRC and the review reports produced upon completion of such exercises will also have a considerable influence on the student enrolment at these institutions. The accreditation exercises conducted by the HKCAAVQ assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the non-UGC-funded tertiary institutions, private course providers, and the programmes they offer and the associated accreditation reports detailing the evaluations, in a similar vein, will also play a key role in student enrolment numbers and, as a consequence, in the income of the institutions and course providers concerned. Thus, the evaluations made in the audit reports, review reports and accreditation reports all have remarkable implications, both reputational and financial, for the public and private tertiary institutions concerned.

The study reported on in the present paper, which is part of an ongoing research project analyzing the discourse of audit and accreditation, focuses specifically on the audit reports prepared by the QAC (see Section 3 for more details). It analyzes the discourse leading up to the three main components of the audit report, namely commendations, affirmations, and recommendations, with particular attention being given to the evaluative prosodies of such discourse. In this paper, 'prosodies' refers to the pattern of use of evaluative language in the discourse leading up to the commendations, affirmations, and recommendations. The 'pattern of use' here refers to (a) the number, type (i.e. affect, judgment, and appreciation) and polarity (i.e. positive or negative) of attitudinal evaluations, and (b) the presence or absence of modifications (i.e. whether the evaluations are strengthened, weakened or neutral) of attitudinal evaluations.

2. Literature review

This section focuses on previous studies on the quality assurance of higher education, before turning to those which explore the use of evaluative language in different genres.

2.1 Higher education quality assurance

Previous research on quality assurance in higher education has focused on such various aspects as purposes, positive consequences, and impact. It has been reported that academic quality assurance can serve a range of purposes. For example, it can help counter the fast pace of the process of institution autonomization through the "reining back of control into the hands of the central authorities" (Thomas 2001). Such centralization of power is enhanced and effected during quality assurance (Hodson & Thomas 2003: 381). The aim of increasing control

is also suggested in Hoecht's (2006) work, which associates the control purpose of quality assurance with (i) putting a stop to the public's blind trust in societal institutions, and (ii) the public's increasing skepticism about the role, judgment and advice of experts and professionals. The monitoring and maintenance of the level of performance and quality of education institutions has also been identified as one of the main purposes of quality assurance work (Tang & Zairi 1998). Some studies specifically report the positive consequences quality audit has brought to the institutions being evaluated. These consequences include, for instance, boosted collaboration among staff members (Stensaker 1999) and improved learning outcomes and teaching effectiveness, enhanced quality of research outputs, and higher PhD degree completion rates (Carr *et al.* 2005). The quality assurance work, however, has also been received less positively. For example, it is said to have caused the change in the role of institutions from educational to financial bodies (Strathern 1997), and to have led to the measurement of the curriculum's merits in terms of marketable skills (Shore & Wright 1999).

Research has also compared the quality assurance systems in different regions of the world. Billing (2004) compared the quality assurance practices mainly in European countries and summarized the main functions of external quality assurance. Brennan & Shah (2000) discussed the problems faced by quality assurance agencies working in both large and small countries. Mok (2000) discussed at great length the introduction and implementation of the quality assurance system in two leading Asian cities, Hong Kong and Singapore.

While much research has been done into a wide range of aspects of quality assurance of higher education, only a few studies have attempted to analyze quality assurance reports, i.e. the discourse detailing the evaluations made by the quality assurance agencies. In his study of 35 audit reports on Swedish universities, Stensaker (2000) mainly discussed the recommendations given by the audit panels; Mackay (1981) described some of the evaluative comments in his discussion of accountability in ESP programmes; and Morley (2003) commented on the way the language used in quality audits could promote and mask political agendas.

The preceding literature review suggests that clearly insufficient attention has been paid to the discourse of quality assurance reports. The discourse of the reports in general, and the use of evaluative language in such reports in particular, warrant more attention for three reasons. First, the deliberations and decisions of the quality assurance agencies concerning the institutions and the programmes offered are made through discourse. Second, since the high-stake evaluations made by the quality assurance agencies in the reports should be sufficiently justified, it will be interesting to explore the way such justification is presented discursively. Third, frequent use of evaluative language in the justification can be reasonably assumed in reports of this kind.

2.2 Use of evaluative language

While one could commonsensically say that the use of evaluative language in the promotional genre (e.g. a leaflet selling a skin product) and the business genre (e.g. staff appraisal report) is not a rarity, research shows that it is also common in journalistic genres which may have been taken as neutral, objective and factual (Holmgreen & Vestergaard 2009; Stenvall 2008), as well as other genres like property transaction reports (Kong 2008), online discussion fora with doctors as participants (Gallardo & Ferrari 2010), narratives (Page 2003), and research articles (Hyland 2005). We can therefore safely conclude that evaluative language is a linguistic resource commonly used by speakers/writers in a wide range of genres.

Appraisal Theory (Martin & White 2005) is the main analytical framework drawn upon in studies which explore and discuss the functions of evaluative language. For example, Page (2003) in her study of childbirth narratives interviewed parents of newborn babies, eliciting their experiences and feelings about the birthing process. It was found that with affect and judgment (social esteem), parents could seek to establish a greater sense of solidarity with the interviewer. Stenvall (2008) studied news discourse concerning the Iraqi war and found that journalists could lead readers to interpret the same incident differently by embedding emotive elements in the discourse. Some readers would therefore be led by one news agency to interpret the post-war situation as hopeful and secure, while others would be led by another news agency to see the same post-war situation as frightening and hopeless.

Drawing upon Appraisal Theory (Martin & White 2005), the present study aims to address the lack of research into the discourse of a high-stake genre — the academic quality audit report — by analyzing the discourse of the audit reports prepared by the QAC in Hong Kong in one round of audit visits to the local publicly-funded tertiary institutions.

3. Methodology

3.1 The data: Audit reports

Audit Panels, formed and appointed by the QAC, comprise senior local and overseas academics with quality audit experience in tertiary education as well as a lay person from the local community. They visit the eight local UGC-funded tertiary institutions for quality assurance purposes approximately once every six years. They examine 'focus areas'¹ (UGC 2007: 11) which contribute to quality student learning. At the end of the audit visit, the Panel prepares an audit report detailing its observations during the visit and stating the evaluations of the focus areas examined. An audit report typically consists of some background information in-

troducing the aim of the quality audit and the institution, the evaluations, as well as the institution's responses to such evaluations. The present study will focus on the three main evaluation components of the audit report, i.e. commendations, affirmations, and recommendations. These components are explicitly marked in the audit reports and are presented twice: the first time in the executive summary in which all the commendations, affirmations, and recommendations are presented in three separate categories; the second time in the main body of the audit report as individual, numbered entries. The discourse preceding these three components will be analyzed comprehensively. This associated discourse forms the evidence on which the three evaluation components are based.

The three components are actually findings from the quality audit exercise which, where appropriate, are expressed as good practices (commendations), a recognition of the improvements made by the institution resulting from its self-review (affirmations), and suggestions for improvement (recommendations) (UGC 2007). The first two components — commendations and affirmations — are more desirable and welcome to the institutions as they actually reflect their strengths, whereas the last one — recommendations — reflects the areas the Audit Panels identify as in need of improvement.

The reports of the same round of quality audit exercises undertaken by the QAC during the period 2008 to 2011 formed the data of the present study. The number of words of each audit report, excluding appendices, ranged from 10,809 to 17,055, with an average length of 13,565 words. The eight local institutions are listed below in alphabetical order (the year in which the audit was conducted is shown in parentheses):

- City University of Hong Kong (2010)
- Hong Kong Baptist University (2009)
- Lingnan University (2010)
- The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2008)
- The Hong Kong Institute of Education (2011)
- The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (2011)
- The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (2010)
- The University of Hong Kong (2009)

1. A total of 11 focus areas are examined by a QAC Audit Panel during a quality audit exercise: 1) articulation of appropriate objectives; 2) management, planning and accountability; 3) programme development and approval processes; 4) programme monitoring and review; 5) curriculum design; 6) programme delivery; 7) experiential and other 'out of classroom' learning; 8) assessment; 9) teaching quality and staff development; 10) student participation; and 11) activities specific to research degrees.

3.2 The theoretical and analytical framework

Since the commendations, affirmations, and recommendations made by the Audit Panels need to be evidence-based, a number of evaluations are made for justification purposes. Appraisal Theory (Martin & White 2005), which specifically concerns the use of evaluative language, was therefore drawn upon as the main theoretical and analytical framework. The theory categorizes the language of evaluation into three regions — attitude, engagement, and graduation. Figure 1 below is a diagrammatic representation of the theory.

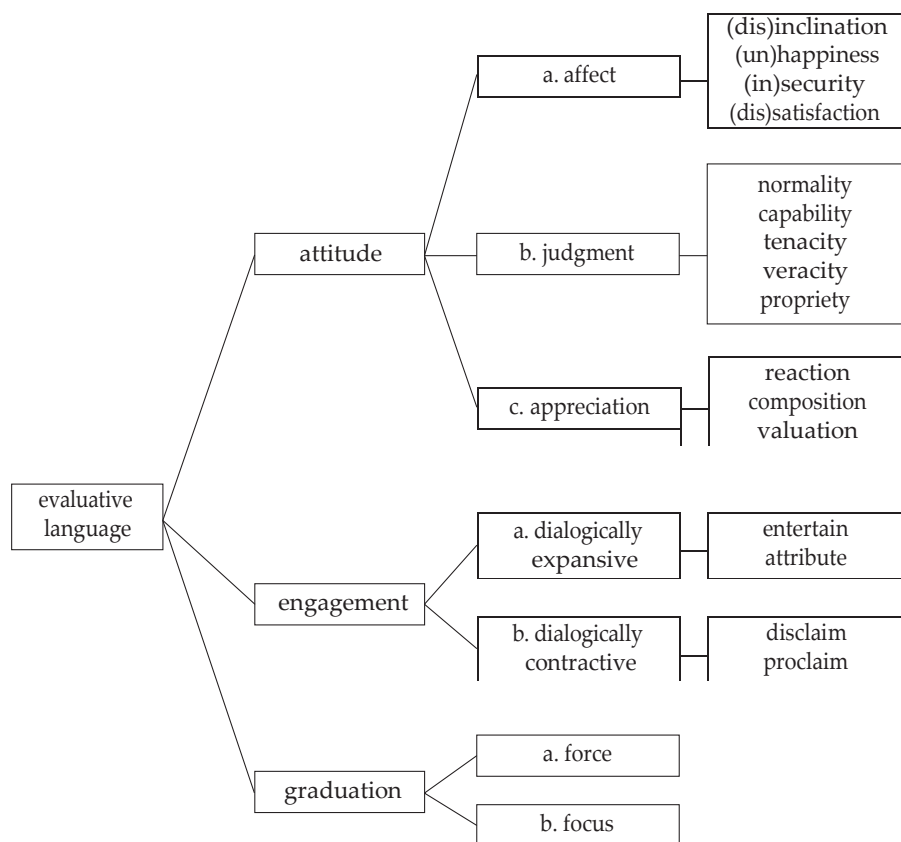


Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of Appraisal Theory

The following paragraphs offer a brief account of the language of evaluation. Table 1 below lists the various regions and categories of evaluative language with textual examples for ease of reference.²

2. For a more comprehensive list of lexicogrammatical resources for evaluation purposes, please see Martin & White (2005: 48–152).

Table 1. Regions and categories of evaluative language

Regions	Categories	Examples
Attitude	Affect (evaluating feelings)	<i>happy/sad; confident/anxious; interested/bored</i>
	Judgment (evaluating behavior)	<i>predictable/unpredictable; sensible/naïve; meticulous/ reckless; honest/dishonest; humble/arrogant</i>
	Appreciation (evaluating phenomena and things)	<i>captivating/boring; beautiful/ugly; harmonious/discor- dant; pure/extravagant; original/conventional</i>
	Engagement	
Engagement	Dialogically expansive	
	Entertain	<i>It seems/suggests that ..., apparently; perhaps, probably, I believe that; may/will/must</i>
	Attribute	<i>X said that, X believes that, according to X, X claims that</i>
	Dialogically contractive	
	Disclaim	<i>don't, can't; (even) though, although, however, but, still, yet</i>
Graduation	Proclaim	<i>naturally, of course, obviously; I contend ..., the truth of the matter is ..., X has shown/demonstrated that ...</i>
	Force	<i>very, extremely, utterly; a bit, somewhat, relatively; more/ less; most/least; many/few, huge/tiny; recent/ancient; nearby/distant; long-lasting/short; widespread/narrowly- based</i>
	Focus	<i>real, genuine, true kind of, sort of</i>

3.2.1 Attitude

The attitude region covers lexicogrammatical resources which construe a speaker's or writer's (henceforth writer's) feelings as affect, judgment, and appreciation (Martin & White 2005). Affect is "concerned with registering positive and negative feelings" (Martin & White 2005: 42), which include inclination/disinclination, happiness/unhappiness, security/insecurity, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction. It can be lexicogrammatically realized through adjectives (e.g. *happy/sad, assured/worried, pleased/angry*), verbs (e.g. *want/fear, like/dislike*), and nominals (e.g. *love/hatred, confidence/anxiety*). Judgment is concerned with construing assessment of behavior in relation to social esteem, which concerns "traits we admire alongside those we criticize"; and social sanction, which concerns "behavior we praise alongside that we condemn" (Martin & White 2005: 52). Social esteem includes normality, capacity and tenacity, which concern respectively how special, capable, and dependable an individual is. Social sanction includes veracity and propriety, which concern respectively how honest and ethical an individual is. Lexicogrammatically, judgment can be realized through adjectives (e.g. *normal/odd, vigorous/weak, expert/inexpert, respectful/discourteous*) and modal verbs

(those showing usuality, probability, inclination, and obligation). Appreciation is concerned with resources for construing assessment of the value of things, semiotic and natural phenomena. It expresses our “‘reactions’ to things and phenomena (do they catch our attention; do they please us?), their ‘composition’ (balance and complexity), and their ‘value’ (how innovative, authentic, timely, etc.)” (Martin & White 2005: 56). Lexicographically, appreciation can be realized with adjectives (e.g. *captivating/boring, balanced/unbalanced, timely/dated*).

3.2.2 Engagement

The engagement region concerns construing and advancing a writer’s position with respect to “the value position being advanced and with respect to potential responses to that value position” (Martin & White 2005: 36) with either dialogically expansive or contractive heteroglossic resources. Dialogically expansive resources are those linguistic expressions which make “allowances for dialogically alternative positions and voices”, while dialogically contractive ones “challenge, fend off or restrict the scope of such” (Martin & White 2005: 102).

Dialogic expansion is subcategorized as entertain or attribute (Martin & White 2005: 98): With entertain the writer’s voice (or authorial voice) indicates that its position is just one of the possible positions and thus makes room for dialogue with these other possible positions. It can be realized with modal auxiliaries (e.g. *can, may*), modal adjuncts (e.g. *probably, somehow*), modal attributes (e.g. *it’s likely that...*); circumstances of the ‘in my view’ type (e.g. *In my opinion*); mental verb or attribute projections (e.g. *I think/believe..., I’m convinced that...*); and evidence/appearance-based postulations (e.g. *apparently, previous studies suggest...*). With attribute the authorial voice dissociates itself from the proposition, or remains ambivalent in its stance, by attributing it to some external source. The authorial voice can either acknowledge the alternative positions or distance itself from such positions. Acknowledge can be realized with reporting verbs (e.g. *report, believe*) or adverbial adjuncts (e.g. *according to, in X’s view*), and distance can be realized typically with *claim* or scare quotes.

Dialogic contraction has two subcategories, disclaim and proclaim (Martin & White 2005: 97–98). With disclaim the authorial voice challenges, fends off or restricts the scope of alternative positions and voices by deny and counter. Deny works by first introducing the alternative position, then acknowledging it, and finally rejecting it. It can be realized with expressions conveying the meaning of no (e.g. *not, none*). Counter works by “represent(ing) the current proposition as replacing or supplanting, and thereby ‘countering’, a proposition which would have been expected in its place” (Martin & White 2005: 120). It can be realized lexicographically with conjunctions and connectives (e.g. *although, however*), comment adjuncts/adverbials (e.g. *surprisingly, unexpectedly*), and focus adjuncts (e.g.

even, only). With proclaim the authorial voice contracts the dialogic space through concur, endorse, and pronounce. Concur indicates that the authorial voice agrees with or has the same knowledge as the alternative positions and voices. It can be realized with expressions like *of course*, *naturally*, and *certainly*; and rhetorical questions with obvious answers that indicate alignment between the authorial and alternative voices. Endorse construes the alternative positions and voices as “correct, valid, undeniable or otherwise maximally warrantable” (Martin & White 2005: 126) with verbs like *show* and *demonstrate*. Pronounce emphasizes or explicitly intervenes/interpolates with expressions like *I contend....* and *The facts of the matter are that...*

3.2.3 Graduation

This category functions to strengthen or soften one’s attitudinal evaluation concerning judgment or appreciation by modifying the force or focus of the evaluation (Martin & White 2005: 137).

With force the authorial voice modifies the attitudinal evaluation of intensity or quantity (Martin & White 2005: 140). Instances of modifications of intensity evaluation include the premodification of adjectives and adverbs (e.g. *a bit/extremely disappointing*, *somewhat/very unexpectedly*), the upscaling or downscaling of verbal groups/verbs and modalities (e.g. *this annoys me slightly/extremely, quite/very likely*), the use of comparatives and superlatives, and the use of repetition by using the same expressions repeatedly or a series of semantically close expressions (Martin & White 2005: 140–144). Modifications of the evaluation of quantity involves the use of expressions of number, mass, and extent in imprecise reckonings of number (e.g. *a few/many*), mass or presence (e.g. *small/huge, light/heavy*), and extent in time and space (e.g. *recent/ancient, close/distant, short-lived/long-lasting, localized/widespread*) (Martin & White 2005: 148–151).

With focus the authorial voice can sharpen the attitudinal evaluation to emphasize prototypicality with expressions like *real* and *true* as in *real jazz* and *true friend*. The authorial voice can, alternatively, soften the evaluation with expressions like *sort of* and *kind of* (Martin & White 2005: 138).

3.2.4 The analysis

The discourse of the audit reports was analyzed following the steps below:

1. The audit reports were read closely by the author and a colleague with extensive experience in using Appraisal Theory as a discourse-analytic tool to identify all the instances in which the various focus areas of the institutions were evaluated with attitude, engagement and graduation.

2. An inter-rater reliability of 54% was obtained.³ The two researchers addressed the discrepancy by reconciliation through discussion and the reliability rate then reached 73%. Only those instances of evaluation that were agreed upon by both researchers were further analyzed.
3. All the identified instances of evaluation were then labeled according to (a) the regions, categories and subcategories of evaluative language, and (b) the polarity of the evaluation, that is, whether the aspects in question were evaluated positively or negatively. The three extracts below illustrate how the labeling was done. The information in the square brackets spells out the region, category and subcategory of the language of evaluation. Attitudinal evaluations (i.e. affect, judgment and appreciation) targeted at the focus areas are preceded by either a plus or a minus sign indicating respectively a positive (i.e. desirable) or negative (i.e. not desirable) evaluation. The emphases and numbers in the following and other extracts shown in the paper are added by the author, unless specified otherwise.

Extract 1

The Panel ①**concluded [engagement-proclaim-pronounce]**, through its review of documentation and discussions with staff, that the Integrated Framework provides a ②**good [+attitude-appreciation-reaction]** mechanism for the alignment of programme outcomes with Institution E's broad educational objectives expressed through its graduate attributes. This ③**alignment [+attitude-appreciation-composition]** is ④**clearly [graduation-intensity-upscaling]** ⑤**demonstrated [engagement-proclaim-endorse]** in those programmes that have undergone Programme Review under the Integrated Framework. ⑥**The evidence presented gave the Panel confidence that [engagement-proclaim-pronounce]** other programmes will ⑦**demonstrate [engagement-proclaim-endorse]** such ⑧**clarity of alignment [+attitude-appreciation-composition]** as they are progressively reviewed under the Integrated Framework.

Extract 2

Institution E's Strategic Plan was developed through a widely consultative process and with the ①**active [graduation-intensity-isolating-upscaling] engagement [+attitude-judgment-propriety]** of the Council in developing, approving and owning the plan. The educational components of the Strategic Plan are ②**consistent with [+attitude-appreciation-composition]** Institution E's mission and UGC role statement. ③**The Panel saw clear evidence**

3. Both the author and the other rater agree that this inter-rater reliability rate (73%) was relatively low even after reconciliation. Both raters, however, do not find it unusual because, as noted by Martin & White (2005: 10), the domains and regions of appraisal can be realized "across a range of grammatical categories".

that [engagement-proclaim-pronounce] Institution E ④is committed to [+attitude-judgment-propriety] implementing its Strategic Plan.

Extract 3

Students ①often [engagement-entertain] ②appear to [engagement-entertain] select courses on the basis of ③rather [graduation-intensity-isolating-downscaling] ④limited [-attitude-appreciation-reaction] information.

4. Each attitudinal evaluation was then classified as a neutral, strengthened, or weakened evaluation. If the attitudinal evaluation was not accompanied by either engagement or graduation, it was classified as neutral (e.g. evaluations ③, ④ and ⑧ of Extract 1, and, ② and ④ of Extract 2). If, in contrast, the attitudinal evaluation was accompanied by engagement and/or graduation, it was classified as either a strengthened or weakened evaluation, depending on the category and subcategory of the accompanying engagement and/or graduation. If the engagement category was proclaim and/or the graduation category was an upscaling one, the attitudinal evaluation was classified as strengthened (e.g. evaluations, ④, ⑤, ⑥, and ⑦ of Extract 1, and ③ of Extract 2). If, however, the engagement category was entertain/attribute and/or the graduation category was a downscaling one, the attitudinal evaluation was then classified as weakened (e.g. evaluation ④ of Extract 3). Table 2 below summarizes the classification criteria.

Table 2. Classification of attitudinal evaluation

	engagement		graduation	
	proclaim	entertain/attribute	upscaling	downscaling
neutral	x	x	x	x
strengthened	✓		✓	
weakened		✓		✓

4. Evaluative prosodies in audit reports

4.1 Evaluative prosodies at macro level

The overall evaluative prosodies of the discourse leading up to the commendations, affirmations, and recommendations (henceforth referred to as commendation discourse, affirmation discourse, and recommendation discourse respectively) are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Overall evaluative prosodies in audit reports (N= Neutral evaluation, S= Strengthened evaluation, W= Weakened evaluation)

	positive evaluation									negative evaluation								
	affect			judgment			appreciation			affect			judgment			appreciation		
	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W
commendations	18	2	2	39	18	9	151	47	40	0	0	2	5	1	1	19	8	8
subtotal																		
total	22			66			238			2			7			35		
affirmations	19	4	4	26	5	5	69	6	37	9	0	2	8	2	8	31	13	14
subtotal																		
total	27			36			112			11			18			58		
recommendations	12	0	3	18	6	3	52	10	15	8	0	1	32	3	11	56	21	28
subtotal																		
total	15			27			77			9			46			105		

The following observations can be made on the basis of Table 3:

- The Audit Panels made both positive/desirable and negative/less desirable evaluations in the commendation discourse, affirmation discourse, and recommendation discourse.
- For both positive and negative evaluations, appreciation was the most frequently used category of evaluative language in the discourse, followed by judgment, and then by affect. It follows that the Audit Panels showed the highest tendency to express their feelings towards the various aspects of the institution by reworking them as “propositions about the value of things — what they are worth or not” (Martin & White 2005: 45), with “things” here referring to the events/phenomena directly or indirectly brought about by the institutions; followed by reworking them as “proposals about behavior” (Martin & White 2005: 45), i.e. how the personnel/units of the institutions should behave or not; and then to express their feelings in a comparatively more direct or bold manner. Given the need for the Audit Panels to be objective in the audit exercise, it is reasonable for them to use affect the least frequently. They could then establish an objective ethos, thereby enhancing their credibility, which in turn increased the persuasiveness of the report (Hyland 2005) (see also Section 5).
- In most cases, the unmodified, neutral evaluations are used most frequently, followed by the weakened, and then the strengthened ones. The higher frequency of neutral evaluations could reflect the need for the Audit Panel to always remain and appear objective (as all evaluations should be evidence-based).

The lower frequency of weakened evaluations could reflect the fact that it is somewhat less important to allow and encourage the institutions to have a dialogue with the Audit Panels and, finally, the strengthened evaluations are the least frequent, possibly reflecting the fact that there is no real need to demonstrate and exercise authority.

- d. The number of positive evaluations decreased from the commendation discourse through the affirmation discourse to the recommendation discourse. Conversely, the number of negative evaluations increased from the commendation discourse through the affirmation discourse to the recommendation discourse. As mentioned earlier, the nature of the components can be said to change from more desirable and more welcome (commendations and affirmations) to less desirable and less welcome (recommendations) from the institution's perspective. By using these two opposite evaluation trends from the commendation discourse through affirmation discourse to recommendation discourse, the Audit Panels could be, through discursive means, laying the ground for the evaluations and preparing the institutions for them, especially for the less desirable and less welcome recommendations.

The above suggests that the Audit Panels were employing evaluative language in the three types of discourse of the audit reports in a strategic manner. The Panels used evaluative linguistic resources in such a way that, on the one hand, they (and the evaluations) appeared to be objective (see observations b and c), and on the other hand, they were preparing the institutions for the evaluations (see observation d). Section 4.2 undertakes a micro-level analysis from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives, aiming to identify and highlight the evaluative prosodies in the build-up to the evaluations.

4.2 Evaluative prosodies at micro level

As this section will show, the evaluative prosodies showed both similarities and differences between the discourse leading up to the commendations, affirmations, and recommendations. They were similar as they all contained positive and negative evaluations instantiated by the whole spectrum of evaluative resources. They were different as the positive evaluation to negative evaluation ratio decreased from the highest at 7.4:1 for commendations through 2:1 for affirmations to 1:1.34 for recommendations. The evaluative prosodies of each of these three components will be presented and discussed in Sections 4.2.1 to 4.2.3 below.

4.2.1 Evaluative prosodies — commendations

The evaluative prosodies of the commendation discourse in the audit reports are shown in Table 4 below. The eight institutions are represented by letters A to H.

Table 4. Evaluative prosodies of commendation discourse

	positive evaluation									negative evaluation								
	affect			judgment			appreciation			affect			judgment			appreciation		
	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W
A	2	–	–	4	2	6	9	1	9	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
B	1	1	1	2	1	2	10	5	8	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	–
C	–	–	1	3	–	1	25	3	10	–	–	–	1	1	1	11	4	2
D	2	–	–	7	4	–	32	8	6	–	–	1	1	–	–	–	–	2
E	1	–	–	6	5	–	17	7	3	–	–	–	2	–	–	7	1	4
F	7	–	–	4	3	–	21	11	1	–	–	–	1	–	–	1	–	–
G	1	–	–	5	1	–	17	4	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
H	4	1	–	8	2	–	20	8	2	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	2	–
subtotal	18	2	2	39	18	9	151	47	40	–	–	2	5	1	1	19	8	8
total	22			66			238			2			7			35		

Table 4 shows that a total of 326 positive evaluations were made, compared to a mere 44 negative evaluations, i.e. 7.4 times more positive evaluations than negative ones. This difference becomes even more striking when individual institutions are considered: not one negative evaluation was made in the commendation discourse in the audit reports of institutions A and G (33 and 29 positive evaluations respectively); only 1 to 4 negative evaluations were present in the commendation discourse written for institutions B, D, F, and H (from 31 to 59 positive evaluations); 14 for institution E (39 positive evaluations), and 20 for institution C (43 positive evaluations). As commendations reflect the strengths of the institutions, it is natural to see a considerably larger number of positive evaluations in the commendation discourse. The two extracts below illustrate the evaluative prosodies of the commendation discourse, with Extract 4 showing the use of positive evaluations only and Extract 5 showing the use of both positive and negative ones.

The students of Institution A mentioned in Extract 4 below were on a teacher training programme. They were evaluated positively as in *expertise in pedagogy* (evaluation ②, positive judgment) and *passion and enthusiasm for teaching as a profession* (evaluations ③ and ④, positive judgment).

Extract 4 (Institution A/Commendation 1)⁴

The employer views [engagement-attribute-acknowledge] were positive [attitude-appreciation-reaction] and focused on what were **considered to be [engagement-attribute-acknowledge]** notable [+ attitude-appreciation-reaction] characteristics of the graduates, namely their depth of ②**expertise in pedagogy** [+attitude- judgment-capacity] and their ③**passion** [+attitude-judgment-propriety] and ④**enthusiasm** [+attitude-judgment-propriety] for teaching as a profession.

In Extract 4, the three positive evaluations were modified by an engagement-attribute-acknowledge realized as *considered to be* (evaluation). That is, the Audit Panel was opening up a dialogic space for alternative viewpoints, probably reflecting the Panel's non-absolute stance towards the positive evaluations made and thus its awareness of alternative opinions. These three positive evaluations were therefore hedged and weakened.

Extract 5 below shows that the Audit Panel evaluated the teaching staff of Institution C positively as in *saw evidence of commitment* (evaluation, positive judgment) and *favorable comments* (evaluation ②, positive appreciation), before negatively evaluating the institution as in *it was not clear what role, ... in this area* (evaluation ③, negative appreciation).

Extract 5 (Institution C/Commendation 6)

The Panel saw **evidence of the commitment** [+attitude-judgement-propriety] of staff to teaching and received ②**favorable comments** [+attitude-appreciation- reaction] from students on the teaching staff. The University is at an early stage of discussion of the teaching-research nexus although [engagement-disclaim-coun- ter] it was ③**not clear** [-attitude-appreciation-composition] what role, if any, the XX School of Graduate Studies (XGS) would [engagement-entertain] play in pro-moting policy in this area.

4.2.2 Evaluative prosodies — affirmations

The evaluative prosodies of the affirmation discourse are summarized in Table 5 below.

Table 5 shows that 175 positive and 87 negative evaluations were made in the affirmation discourse, i.e. just twice as many positive ones as negative ones — a considerably smaller difference than that found in the commendation discourse. The distribution of positive and negative evaluations was also more even — the majority of the numerical differences stood at 8 or below (Institutions C, D, E, and F)

4. In this and the following extracts, only evaluations that target the institutions, their personnel or students are highlighted and analyzed further.

Table 5. Evaluative prosodies of affirmation discourse

	positive evaluation									negative evaluation								
	affect			judgment			appreciation			affect			judgment			appreciation		
	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W
A	–	1	–	1	–	1	7	1	5	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	–
B	4	1	2	3	–	2	9	–	12	1	–	2	4	1	–	6	–	5
C	5	–	1	2	–	–	13	4	10	2	–	–	3	1	5	10	11	6
D	1	–	–	1	–	–	2	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	1
E	1	–	–	7	–	–	9	–	5	2	–	–	1	–	1	8	1	1
F	–	–	–	–	–	1	4	–	2	1	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	–
G	1	1	1	10	3	1	20	–	2	2	–	–	–	–	1	3	–	–
H	7	1	–	2	2	–	5	–	1	1	–	–	–	–	1	1	1	1
Subtotal	19	4	4	26	5	5	69	6	37	9	–	2	8	2	8	31	13	14
Total	27			36			112			11			18			58		

or ranged between 13 and 15 (Institutions A, B, and H). Only one institution recorded a remarkably larger difference — 33 for Institution G.

Despite the comparatively smaller difference, more positive evaluations were still made than negative ones in affirmation discourse by the Audit Panels for all but one institution (Institution C). This is understandable and reasonable since affirmations, according to the QAC, reflect the strengths of the institutions — the improvement the institutions have made following their self-review.

Extract 6 below shows part of the affirmation discourse in which both positive and negative evaluations, as well as neutral and weakened ones were used. The QAC Panel evaluated positively the programme approval process of Institution B as *robust* (evaluation, positive appreciation), but then immediately made a negative evaluation concerning the incomplete adaptation of the document templates as in *have not yet been fully adapted* (evaluation ②, negative appreciation). Despite the incomplete adaptation, the Panel still recognized the value of the template, saying that it was a *useful approach* (evaluation ③, positive appreciation). While the previous three evaluations were neutral, the positive judgment which came next concerning the commendable behavior of the institution (evaluation ⑤, positive judgment) was weakened by *it appears to* (evaluation ④, entertain).

Extract 6 (Institution B/Affirmation 5)

The programme approval process is **robust** [+attitude-appreciation-composition] though [engagement-disclaim-counter] the document templates currently in use ②**have not yet been fully adapted** [-attitude-appreciation-composition]

to OBE. ... This pilot template represents a ③**useful** [+attitude-appreciation-val- ue] approach to take forward as ④**it appears to** [engagement-entertain] ⑤**call for deeper reflection** [+attitude-judgment-propriety] on how course teaching methods and assessment items contribute effectively to achievement of ILOs.

4.2.3 Evaluative prosodies — recommendations

The evaluative prosodies of the recommendation discourse are summarized in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Evaluative prosodies of recommendation discourse

	positive evaluation									negative evaluation								
	affect			judgment			appreciation			affect			judgment			apprecia- tio		
	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W	N	S	W
A	4	–	–	3	–	1	13	1	1	3	–	–	12	–	5	23	9	9
B	–	–	–	–	1	–	1	3	2	3	–	–	3	–	3	2	2	2
C	1	–	–	2	–	–	5	–	5	–	–	–	1	–	1	6	1	3
D	–	–	1	3	–	1	7	–	2	1	–	–	7	1	1	6	3	2
E	2	–	1	2	–	–	9	1	–	–	–	–	2	–	–	7	2	9
F	5	–	–	2	2	–	9	3	2	1	–	–	2	1	–	3	2	1
G	–	–	1	3	1	1	5	–	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	2	1	1
H	–	–	–	3	2	–	3	2	–	–	–	1	5	1	1	7	1	1
subtotal	12	–	3	18	6	3	52	10	15	8	–	1	32	3	11	56	21	28
total	15			27			77			9			46			105		

Table 6 shows that the differences in the number of positive and negative evaluations made in the recommendation discourse continued to decrease. There were 119 positive evaluations and 160 negative evaluations, amounting to a difference of only 1.34 times (the differences were respectively 7.4 times and 2 times for the commendation discourse and affirmation discourse). Table 6 also shows that only in the recommendation discourse do we witness a larger number of negative evaluations than positive ones. Except Institutions C, F and G, the other institutions all recorded more negative evaluations than positive ones, the differences ranging from 33% to as much as 158%. What is also noteworthy is that the Audit Panels were making the largest number of negative evaluations and smallest number of positive evaluations in the recommendation discourse (negative vs. positive evaluations in commendation discourse was 44 vs. 326, in affirmation discourse 87 vs. 175, and in recommendation discourse 160 vs. 119). This should be reasonable given that the recommendations were actually suggestions for improvement on

the areas that had been identified by the Audit Panels as in need of improvement. It could serve to lay the ground for and prepare the institutions for the forthcoming recommendations.

Extract 7 below shows how the Audit Panel prepared Institution D for one of the recommendations it made. The initial recognition of the strength of the institution as in *The Panel recognizes that much good practice occurs at the local level* (evaluation, positive appreciation) is followed by a change of tone realized by two counter expressions *However* and *yet*. These two counter expressions lead the reader (the institution in particular) to the negative evaluation that the procedures for the quality assurance and enhancement system had not been embraced fully by all the units concerned so that the appropriate flow of information along the hierarchy of the institution could not be ensured (evaluation ②, negative appreciation). The Panel then went on to point out two other issues that needed the institution's attention for improvement (evaluations ③ and ④, both being negative appreciation).

Extract 7 (Institution D/Recommendation 1)

The Panel recognizes [engagement-entertain] that much **good** [+attitude-appreciation-reaction] practice occurs at the local level, including closing the quality loop (paragraphs 2.9 and 12.1 refer). However [engagement-disclaim-counter], the Panel considers [engagement-entertain] that the set of procedures for the newly-stream-lined [graduation-quantity-extent-time] quality assurance and quality enhancement system ②**has yet** [engagement-disclaim-counter] **to be fully** [graduation-intensity-isolation-upscaling] **embraced by all units concerned to ensure comprehensive monitoring and reporting, with appropriate flow-through of information up and down the hierarchy from Programmes/Departments to Schools and Faculties, and to senior management and back down again** [- attitude-appreciation-composition]. The current evaluations use a ③**limited** [-attitude-appreciation-reaction] set of tools and there is ④**insufficient** [-attitude-appreciation-reaction] evidence of systemic issues gleaned from evaluations being considered at higher levels.

5. Striking a balance

This section argues that the Audit Panels, apart from presenting the “valid, evidence based judgments” (UGC 2007: 31) in an attempt to show the various stakeholders of tertiary education the performance of the individual UGC-funded institutions, were attempting to strike a balance with the evaluative prosodies observed between (1) the need to discharge their quality assurance responsibilities with their power vested by the UGC; (2) the need to maintain and/or reinforce a credible ethos for the Panels themselves, and (3) the need to attend to the face wants of the institutions and their stakeholders.

The establishment of the QAC, as stated in the Audit Manual (UGC 2007: 5), is to assist the UGC in discharging its quality assurance responsibilities. The QAC has the power to form panels based on established criteria for the purpose of conducting quality audits at local tertiary institutions. The power of the panels thus formed is clearly defined: “It does, however, oblige institutions to articulate and justify the standards they set for themselves, and demonstrate how the standards are achieved” (UGC 2007: 10). The issue of power associated with the quality audit exercise has been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Findlow 2008; Hodson & Thomas 2003; Hoecht 2006). The Audit Panel’s exercising of power, however, is accompanied by the Panel’s attempts to first maintain and/or reinforce a credible ethos, and second to attend to the face needs of the institutions and their stakeholders. These two attempts are discussed below.

The credibility of a QAC Audit Panel should already be widely recognized in view of the stringent process of panel formation and qualifications of its members (UGC 2007: 22–23). However, such credibility needs maintenance and/or reinforcement, particularly in the high-stake audit report which presents the Audit Panel’s evaluations of the institution. Maintaining and/or reinforcing the writer’s credible ethos through discourse in various genres, such as company Chief Executive Officer’s letters and academic articles, has been discussed thoroughly (e.g. Afros & Schryer 2009; Crismore & Farnsworth 1990; Hyland 1998a, b). It has been shown that the right balance in the use of metadiscourse markers such as hedges and boosters (corresponding in evaluative language terms respectively to entertain/downscaling and proclaim/upscaling) can function to build a credible ethos for the writers. The two extracts below show how such an ethos can be maintained and/or reinforced through the use of evaluative language in academic quality audit reports. Extract 8 concerns a positive evaluation (a commendation), Extract 9 a negative one (a recommendation).

In Extract 8, the Audit Panel used both entertain (evaluation) and upscaling (evaluation ③) to make its evidence-based judgment in the commendation discourse sound cautious on the one hand (combined effect of evaluations and ②), and authoritative on the other (combined effect of evaluations ③ and ④), thereby maintaining and/or reinforcing its credible ethos (Hyland 2005). Extract 9 is part of a recommendation discourse showing how the Audit Panel maintained and/or reinforced its credibility while evaluating the institution negatively.

Extract 8 (Institution H/Commendation 4)

The Review process **appears to [engagement-entertain]** be ②**effective** [+attitude-appreciation-value] and ③**of genuine** [graduation-intensity-isolating- upscaling] ④**value** [+attitude-appreciation-value] to improving the academic quality of the reviewed programmes.

Extract 9 (Institution G/Recommendation 7)

Nevertheless [engagement-disclaim-counter], the Panel **found clear evidence [engagement-proclaim-pronounce]** that this policy ②**was not applied uniformly [-attitude-appreciation-composition]** across [graduation-quantity-extent- space] the University. ... Yet [engagement-disclaim-counter] the Panel ③**was left with the firm view that [engagement-proclaim-pronounce]** variations in practice exist between Faculties and Departments, and the institutional policy ④**does not appear to be [engagement-entertain] applied rigidly [-attitude-appreciation-composition].**

On the one hand, the Audit Panel showed its “authorial emphases” (Martin & White 2005: 127) twice with pronounce (evaluations and ③) on the forthcoming negative evaluations (evaluations ② and ④, negative appreciation), thereby demonstrating its certainty and authority (Hyland 2005). On the other hand, it demonstrated its cautiousness with the use of entertain (embedded in evaluation ④), mitigating the force of the negative evaluation conveyed by “not...applied rigidly”, thereby demonstrating its objectivity and thus maintaining/reinforcing its credibility (Hyland 2005).

The mitigation of the force of the negative evaluation with entertain (evaluation ④) as observed in Extract 9 should also be the Audit Panel’s attempt to attend to the face needs of the institution and its stakeholders. Face, according to Spencer-Oatey (2008: 14), is concerned with “people’s sense of worth, dignity and identity, and is associated with issues such as respect, honour, status, reputation and competence”. Spencer-Oatey (2008: 14) further specifies people’s desire for others’ positive evaluations and non-preference for negative ones as follows: “[p]eople have a fundamental desire for others to evaluate them positively, and so they typically want others to acknowledge (explicitly or implicitly) their positive qualities, and *not* to acknowledge their negative qualities” (emphasis original). Such a description of face is of particular relevance to the present study. The institution being audited normally desires some positive evaluations from the Audit Panel such that its worth, dignity, identity, status, and competence are recognized openly, its reputation enhanced, and that it is respected. One of the purposes of the Audit Panel in using strengthened positive evaluations (thus acknowledging positive qualities explicitly) and weakened negative evaluations (thus de-emphasizing negative qualities) should be to address such face needs. This purpose is actually stipulated in the Audit Manual: “On their part, the QAC and the audit panel approach the audit in a professional and constructive way, exercising peer judgement while respecting the institution’s autonomy and ethos” (UGC 2007: 17). The number of strengthened and weakened evaluations of the three kinds — affect, judgment, and appreciation — is shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7. The use of strengthened and weakened evaluations

	positive evaluation						negative evaluation					
	affect		judgment		appreciation		affect		judgment		appreciation	
	S	W	S	W	S	W	S	W	S	W	S	W
commendations	2	2	18	9	47	40	–	2	1	1	8	8
affirmations	4	4	5	5	6	37	–	2	2	8	13	14
recommendations	–	3	6	3	10	15	–	1	3	11	21	28
total	6	9	29	17	63	92	–	5	6	20	42	50

Table 7 shows that the Audit Panel showed a stronger tendency to use strengthened positive evaluations than strengthened negative evaluations. The strengthened to weakened positive evaluations ratios for affect, judgment, and appreciation are respectively 0.67, 1.71, and 0.68; and corresponding ratios for negative evaluations are 0, 0.3, and 0.84. The ratios suggest that the Audit Panels were more eager to attend to the face needs of the institutions and their stakeholders by acknowledging their positive qualities on the one hand, and to soften the negative effect resulting from acknowledging the negative qualities of the institutions with a higher frequency of use of weakened negative evaluations on the other.

The constructive and desirable effects of audits resulting from the use of evaluative language in audit reports are at odds with a number of earlier studies. First, in a study which also commented on the role of language in the audit reports in the UK context, it was claimed that language “was fairly central to the hegemonic tension” between the cultures of accountability and academic innovation in learning and teaching in the “framing, interpreting and, crucially, misinterpreting of messages and ideas” (Findlow 2008: 324). According to Findlow, the tension arose from the fact that while the institutions were required to encourage innovative practice in support of quality learning and teaching (2008: 313), they were hesitant about doing so as they worked to avoid problematization and risks (2008: 318) and to mirror managerial language, that is, to “communicate in management approved code”, stressing “efficiency and “support” instead of innovation (2008: 325). She further commented negatively that such language use would be to the detriment of learning and teaching quality (2008: 325). Second, Trowler (1998) argued that the academic quality audit was a kind of surveillance counterproductive to many aspects of academics’ work. The present study, however, lends support, remotely though it may seem, to Strathern’s (2000: 3) work, which suggests that the academic audit “advances values that academics generally hold dear, such as responsibility, openness about outcomes”.

6. Conclusion

This paper has reported on a study which forms part of an ongoing research project concerning the discourse of academic quality audit and accreditation reports, two genres that are becoming increasingly high-stake in the higher education sector. It has focused particularly on academic quality audit reports in the Hong Kong context. Drawing upon Appraisal Theory (Martin & White 2005), it has explored the evaluative prosodies, i.e. the pattern of use of evaluative language, of the discourse leading up to the three main components of the audit reports — commendations, affirmations, and recommendations. The author has argued that, despite the power vested in the Audit Panels to discharge quality assurance responsibilities, these Panels had made an attempt to maintain and/or reinforce a credible ethos, and to attend to the face needs of the institutions and their stakeholders with the observed evaluative prosodies. First, the frequency of use of the three types of attitudinal evaluation decreased from appreciation through judgment to affect. This decrease has been attributed to the Panels' need and desire to remain and appear objective, and thus to maintain and/or reinforce their credible ethos. Second, the Panels used more strengthened positive evaluations than strengthened negative evaluations, thereby acknowledging more explicitly the positive qualities of the institutions on the one hand, and reducing the impact of highlighting the negative qualities of the institutions on the other. Third, the number of positive evaluations made by the Panels decreased from commendations to affirmations to recommendations; while the number of negative evaluations increased. These two opposing trends prepared the institutions for both the more desirable and welcome evaluations (i.e. commendations and affirmations) and the less desirable and welcome ones (i.e. recommendations), thereby showing consideration for the institutions' feelings and emotions. The second and third evaluative prosodies could function to address the face needs of the institutions and their stakeholders.

At least two main merits of the study deserve to be mentioned. First, it has extended the scope of application of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White 2005) to a discourse type that is becoming increasingly important but unfortunately less attended to — the discourse of academic quality audit reports. Second, it has enriched our understanding of the discourse of academic quality audits, revealing that the use of evaluative language allows the Audit Panels to achieve their various goals, both transactional and relational (Brown & Yule 1983). The data used in the present study, however, only concerned the publicly-funded tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. It is therefore desirable for further research to also include academic quality audit reports of (1) private tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, and (2) both public and private tertiary institutions in other regions of the world. Statistical analyses will then be possible, thereby enhancing both the reliability and validity of the study.

Acknowledgement

I am very grateful to both J. Lachlan Mackenzie and the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper, and my colleague, Vincy Zhang, for her time and effort in acting as the second rater. The work described in this paper was substantially supported by a grant from the Faculty of Humanities of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Project No. 1-ZVBE).

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