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Modulating Meaning in Discourse: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Approach to Graduation in A Motivational Book

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ABSTRACT

The study explores linguistic aspects in the appraisal system, focusing on graduation, particularly force and focus, within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to find out how messages are conveyed and negotiated in a motivational book. This research examines how upscaling and downscaling in force and sharpening and softening in focus influence the meaning construction in texts. A qualitative approach was applied, analyzing selected textual data to identify linguistic patterns that contribute to meaning amplification or reduction. The findings reveal that force plays a dominant role in strengthening evaluative meanings through intensifiers, attitudinal lexis, and metaphors, while focus refines categorization by emphasizing or blurring distinctions. The study highlights how these linguistic strategies shape persuasion and reader perception, demonstrating their significance in effective communication. By offering insights into the nuanced functions of graduation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of meaning modulation in discourse.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics; Appraisal; Graduation; Motivational Book

1. Introduction

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) first proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen, deals with three metafunctions: ideational (experience and logical), interpersonal (so-

cial interaction between the speaker or writer and the listener or reader), and textual (cohesively and coherently) ^[1-3].

However, the interpersonal metafunction is limited to the mood, which examines subject and finite (predicate in formal linguistics) and residue (complement) in a clause.

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Hence, the appraisal serves several key functions in understanding how meaning is constructed and communicated^[4]. Appraisal devices are classified into attitude, engagement, and graduation. Graduation deals with the amplification or softening of meaning, which shapes the intensity and force of the author's stance. Hood (2004) highlights that graduation allows for the intensification of meaning, which can significantly affect the positioning of readers^[5].

A motivational book by Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, had a global impact as one of the most influential self-development books. Since its first publication in 1989, the book has sold over 25 million copies and has been translated into more than 40 languages^[6,7]. It was also ranked among Time magazine's 25 most influential books^[8]. The translation of this book presents a unique challenge due to its frequent use of intensification to persuade and motivate readers. Covey's writing relies heavily on graduation through intensifiers and amplifiers, which are the best and most effective ways to reinforce his motivational tone in a text.

Motivational books are designed to influence readers' mindsets, attitudes, and behaviors by presenting ideas, principles, and values persuasively and inspiring. One of the key linguistic strategies used to achieve this persuasive power is graduation. This appraisal theory subsystem deals with the upscaling or downscaling of meaning, intensity, and focus in a text. Through graduation, authors strategically adjust the strength of their evaluations to align readers with their viewpoints, intensify emotional impact, and reinforce the importance of certain principles. Despite the central role that motivational books play in shaping readers' personal development and worldview, studies focusing specifically on the graduation aspect of appraisal within this genre remain scarce. Most existing research on appraisal tends to focus on attitude or engagement, leaving the graduation system underexplored—particularly in texts designed to persuade and inspire. Understanding how graduation operates in a motivational book can reveal the subtle yet powerful linguistic techniques authors use to intensify positive values, diminish negative aspects, and maintain reader engagement.

In recent years, numerous scholars have conducted studies employing appraisal theory across the range of various genres both written texts and oral/verbal rhetoric.

These studies have demonstrated that appraisal theory is highly effective for analyzing ideology, characters' attitudes in narratives, authors' stances in media columns, characters portrayed in films, and even teachers' utterances in classroom interactions. For instance, a study on attitude revealed differences in argumentative essays written in English and Chinese^[9]. Their findings indicated that English essays employed more judgment resources compared to affect and appreciation, whereas Chinese essays tended to use appreciation more frequently than affect and judgment. Meanwhile, studies on news articles and columns in newspapers and other media demonstrated that all three appraisal systems—attitude, engagement, and graduation—were utilized through both positive and negative statements. This is understandable, as print and electronic media must maintain balance and neutrality in delivering information^[10–12].

Appraisal theory has also been employed to analyze characters' attitudes and traits in novels, where judgment was found to dominate over affect and appreciation^[12,13]. Additionally, appraisal analysis has been applied to investigate teachers' speech and advice in classrooms. Findings showed that engagement plays a significant role in interpersonal communication between teachers and students, often expressed through simple monoglossic statements or varied heteroglossic utterances, whether objective or subjective. Heteroglossic expressions tend to capture students' attention more effectively than monoglossic ones^[10].

Although these studies provide important insights, most of them have primarily focused on identifying the types of appraisal resources used—such as the dominance of judgment in English texts or appreciation in Chinese texts—which may reflect the distinct argumentative cultures of each language. However, Chu's study did not explicitly examine cultural aspects^[10]. Moreover, these studies have not delved into analyzing the meaning behind the phenomena uncovered, nor have they explicitly explored moral judgment or value judgment embedded in written or verbal rhetoric, such as in teachers' classroom discourse. Most focus has remained on identifying statement types (monoglossic or heteroglossic) without examining the underlying values conveyed in these statements.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by specifically analyzing the values and principles embedded in

the motivational messages conveyed and negotiated by Covey to his readers. Moreover, exploring graduation in a widely influential motivational book, such as *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey, offers valuable insights into how force and focus are linguistically constructed to strengthen the message. Covey's work is not just a collection of self-help advice but a complex negotiation of values and principles aimed at reshaping the reader's character and worldview. Analyzing the use of intensifiers, attitudinal lexis, metaphors, and focus strategies will uncover how the text amplifies certain habits as highly desirable while downscaling or softening potential weaknesses. Given the widespread influence of motivational literature on individual and societal levels, this research is timely and necessary. It will contribute to a deeper understanding of the persuasive power of language in motivational discourse and fill the gap in existing appraisal studies by highlighting graduation as a critical resource in value negotiation. Such analysis not only enriches linguistic scholarship but also provides practical insights into how language can be effectively used to inspire change, shape attitudes, and promote positive values.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Literature review

In the realm of SFL, language is understood as a semiotic system that produces multiple layers of meaning simultaneously. One of the most influential contributions to this field is appraisal theory, which emerged to address the limitations of traditional SFL in capturing the nuanced interpersonal meaning embedded in language. Appraisal theory refines the SFL model by examining how evaluative meaning is constructed, negotiated, and experienced within texts. Central to this theory is the concept of graduation, a process that modulates the intensity and scale of evaluative expressions. Language is structured to make three main kinds of meanings simultaneously. This semantic complexity is possible because language is a semiotic system: a conventionalized coding system, organized as sets of choices^[14]. In other words, graduation serves as a mechanism to adjust the force and focus of evaluative language, ensuring that the nuances of attitude are communicated with precision. **Figure 1** below shows the elements

of graduation.

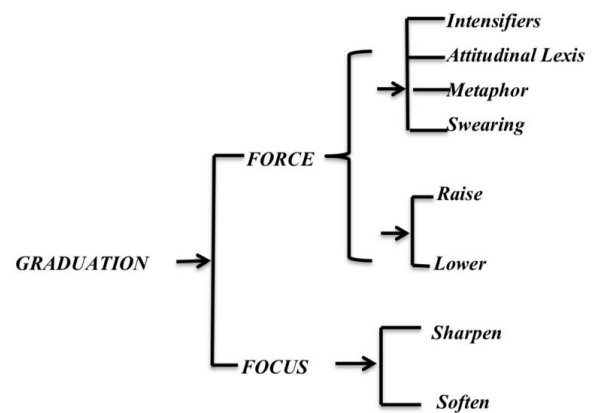


Figure 1. Types of graduation (Martin and Rose, 2007: 48).

Graduation operates along two interconnected dimensions: force and focus. The force dimension concerns the intensity of evaluative language or even colloquial elements like mild swearing. Choosing intensifiers, attitudinal lexis, metaphor, and swearing may be considered a sentence that is lower or raised in discourse. Force is considered to be raising or lowering depending on how strongly an evaluation is expressed. For instance, the word ‘incredibly’ as an intensifier in this clause, “she is incredibly talented,” relies on subtle linguistic cues that amplify the underlying evaluation, imbuing the text with a persuasive emotional charge. Compared to ‘somewhat’ in ‘she is somewhat talented,’ this word functions as a down-toner that reduces the strength evaluation. It softens the impact by indicating that the talent is moderate rather than outstanding. In addition, the use of hedges also softens force in a discourse. As examples, these clauses have different forces, although both use swearing: “That was fucking amazing.” and “It was damn good if you ask me.” In the first clause, the word “fucking” is used to emphasize and heightens the emotional intensity.

Meanwhile, the second clause has “if you ask me,” which shows a slightly hedged enthusiasm. The second aspect, the focus dimension, involves either sharpening or softening this evaluative meaning. By choosing to sharpen, a writer might make an evaluation more precise or emphatic; by softening, the writer may moderate the intensity to align with cultural norms or the intended audience's expectations. For example, the two words “about” and “exactly” in two clauses, “After about three years with the special forces.” and “After exactly three years

with the special forces,” have different focuses. The word ‘about’ in the clause softens the focus by not telling the exact time. On the other hand, the word ‘exactly’ sharpens the focus by making the meaning clear. Martin and Rose encapsulate this idea by noting that appraisal “is concerned with evaluation: the kinds of attitudes negotiated in a text, the strength of the feeling involved and how values are sourced and readers aligned.”^[15]

2.2. Methods

This study is a qualitative-descriptive design with a single-embedded case study. Qualitative research aims to comprehend a phenomenon about the experience of the research subject in terms of words and language^[16]. The words and language as the data in this research are not investigated through statistical methods. However, the number used in this research is representative of finding out the pattern and drawing a conclusion. This research is theory-driven, applying Appraisal Theory in graduation as a device of appraisal devices^[1,3,4,15,17]. This research applied a purposive sampling technique. In qualitative research, a sampling technique is applied to achieve the research objectives^[18]. Consequently, the purposive sampling technique selects the data sources and data aligning with several criteria. The criteria for choosing the informants (raters) as data sources are the linguists whose latest education is a doctoral degree in applied linguistics (translation studies), the ones who understand SFL frameworks, specifically in the appraisal system, the ones who understand how to assess the translation quality using Nababan et al.’s instrument, and the ones who are willing to be involved in this research. For selecting the document, the motivational book “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” was chosen because of its high sales at that time, assuming that this book might influence its readers. The data are also taken by selecting sentences containing graduation devices, force and focus in the motivational book entitled “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”. Sentences without graduation devices were deleted from the data collection.

For its reliability, two out of four data validations were applied: the validation of data collection methods and data sources^[18,19]. The validation of data sources was done by listing sentences containing graduation devices in the book and information from informants (raters). Mean-

while, the validation of data collection methods was done by conducting a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) with the raters. The raters and the researchers separated the data from those that were not and classified the graduation devices based on Martin and Rose’s appraisal theory. The researchers led the discussion since they mastered the theory and clarified which classification was the best. When they encountered disagreements, the final decision came to the experts in SFL.

Lastly, in determining the pattern and drawing a conclusion, this research applied four stages of data analysis: domain analysis, taxonomy analysis, componential analysis, and cultural-theme analysis^[19]. Domain analysis contains the parts of the book. Domain analysis identified types of graduation (force and focus) in the book. Taxonomy analysis contains the force and focus devices used by the writer in the book. The componential analysis covers all domains and taxonomies to determine the pattern. Lastly, the pattern determined from the componential analysis was blended into the cultural theme analysis. In this last stage, this research explains why such a pattern happened.

3. Results

As explained in the theoretical review, graduation is an important appraisal device because it explains the intensity of attitudes (affect, judgment, and appreciation). The extent to which the author amplifies his ideas can also be identified through the types of graduation used—whether through Force (up-scaling or downscaling) or Focus (sharpening or softening).

From the 946 data points found in this motivational book, it is evident that the use of force is far more dominant—863 cases (91.2%)—compared to focus, which appears in only 83 cases (8.8%). This indicates that Covey presents his ideas, principles, and values primarily by using gradable force (91.2%) rather than non-gradable force, which accounts for only 8.8%. Among the four types of Force—namely Intensifiers, Attitudinal lexis, Metaphor, and Swearing—Attitudinal lexis is the most dominantly used graduation type (503 cases = 58.3%), followed by up-scaling intensifiers (275 cases = 31.9%), then downscaling intensifiers (45 cases = 5.2%), and lastly metaphor/simile (40 cases = 4.6%). One interesting finding from this motivational book is that the text contains no swearing or

profanity at all (0%). Meanwhile, for the Focus type, the following were found: (1) sharpen—74 cases (7.8%), and (2) soften—9 cases (2%), most of which fall under the ex-

periential category. Non-gradable context was rarely used in this motivational book. More detailed data can be found in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. The table of graduation distributions in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.

No	Graduation Categories	Praise	Acknowledgement	Paradigms and Principles	The Personality and character Ethics	The Power of Paradigms	Overview	Be Proactive	Begin with the end in mind	Put the first thing	Think win win	Seek first to understand	Synergize	Sharpen the saw	TOTAL
A	Force														
	Intensifier														
1	Up-scaling	14	7	20	25	37	26	23	40	12	9	17	32	13	275
	Downscaling	-	1	9	20	3	8	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	45
2	Attitudinal Lexis	34	34	34	72	77	77	36	48	8	20	21	17	25	503
3	Metaphor/Simile	3	-	1	5	1	2	5	2	-	2	17	1	1	40
4	Swearing	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Total of Force														863
B	Focus														
1	Sharpen	4	2	1	10	6	6	2	7	10	2	1	19	4	74
2	Soften	1	-	3	1	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9
	Total of Focus														83
	Total of Data	56	44	68	133	124	123	70	97	30	33	56	68	43	946

Based on the evidence obtained in this book, it can be interpreted that the author's strategy in presenting his ideas in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People largely utilizes the sub-device Force (863 cases: 91.2%), which consists of attitudinal lexis (58.3%) and upscaling intensifiers (31.9%). Meanwhile, downscaling intensifiers account for only 5.2%, and figurative/metaphorical expressions make up just 4.6%. However, this book applies the focus dimension less frequently than the force dimension. The table shows only 83 focus application applications. The comparative data for each type of graduation dimension used by Ste-

phen Covey is illustrated in **Figure 2**.

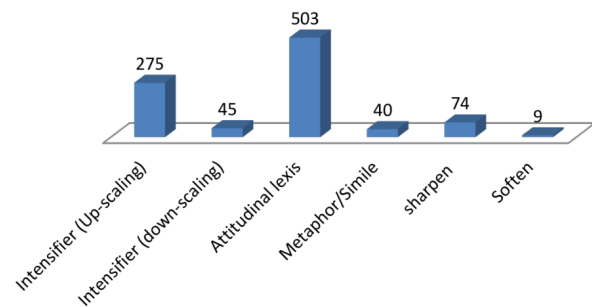


Figure 2. The the chart of graduation.

3.1. Amplifying Attitude Through Force Dimension

Martin and Rose (2007) categorize graduation into two dimensions: force and focus. The use of intensifiers, attitudinal lexis, and metaphors or similes decides whether the author amplifies (up-scales) or diminishes (down-scales) the strength of their evaluations. The examples below show the up-scaling intensifier, attitudinal lexis, and metaphors or similes.

Data No. 1

Praise for “The 7 habits of **highly effective people** by Stephen R. Covey.” (p.1)

Data No. 9

I have never known any teacher or mentor on improving personal effectiveness to generate such an **overwhelmingly positive reaction** (p1/ph.2/1 1–2) John Pepper, President of Procter and Gamble.

Data No. 30

A wonderful contribution. Dr. Covey has synthesized the habits of **our highest achievers** and presented them in a powerful, easy to use program. (p.iii/ph.2/1.1–2) Charles Garfield, author of Peak Performer.

Data No. 2

Stephen Covey has written **a remarkable book** about the human condition, so elegantly written, so understanding of our embedded concerns, so useful for our organizational and personal lives, that it’s going to be my gift to everyone I know.” (p.i/ph.1/1.1–4) Warren Bennis, author of On Becoming a Leader.

Data No. 86

To my proactive literary agent Jan Miller, and my “can do” associate Greg Link and his assistant Stephanni Smith and Rallin Beckam Wahlin for their Creative and courageous marketing leadership (p.10/ph.4/1.1–3)

Data No. 90

Data No. 12

Stephen Covey is **an American Socrates**, opening your mind to permanent things’- values, family, relationships, communicating”. (p.i/ph.3/L.1) Brian Tracy, author of the Psychology of Achievement.

Data No. 534

Private victories precede public victories. You can not invert that process anymore than **you can not harvest**

a crop before you plant it. It’s inside-out. (p.51/5)

In the framework of appraisal theory in SFL, the expression through intensifiers in the data numbers 1, 9, and 30 enhances the degree of effectiveness, positivity, and achievement, reinforcing the extraordinary nature of Covey’s ideas. Similarly, attitudinal lexis such as in data numbers 2 and 86 embeds explicit positive evaluation, framing Covey’s work as not only significant but also transformative. Furthermore, metaphors and similes in the data numbers 12 and 534 contribute to upscaling by aligning concepts with universally esteemed references. For example, “an American Socrates” elevates Covey’s intellectual stature, likening him to one of history’s greatest thinkers. However, the author also strengthens his idea by analogizing someone’s success to the process of harvesting.

While up-scaling intensifiers, attitudinal lexis, and metaphors or similes function to elevate quality and make comparisons between objects, down-scaling intensifiers, attitudinal lexis, and metaphors or similes, on the other hand, function to reduce intensity, limit quantity, or soften evaluation. The following are several examples of weakened meaning gradation (downscaling).

Data No.61

The material and arrangement has **slowly evolved** and has imbued those who have been sincerely and deeply immersed in it the conviction, that the seven habits represent a holistic, integrated approach to personal and interpersonal effectiveness, and that more than in the individual habits themselves, the real key lies in the relationship among them and in how they are sequenced. (p.9/ph.3/1.5–10)

Data No.139

One of our sons was having **a very difficult time** in school. (part 1/p.16/ph.9/1.2–3)

Data No.153

If he did **a little better**, we would go to great lengths to reinforce him. (part 1/p.17/ph.1/1.8–9)

Data No. 112

After a few weeks, **I fizzle**. I just can’t seem to keep a promise I make to myself (part 1/p.15/ph.4/1.4–5)

Data No. 119

I feel pressured and hassled all day, every day, seven days a week. (part 1/p.16/ph.2/1.1–2)

Data No. 38

In the '90s, **America needed to unlock the door** to increase productivity both on a business and personal basis. (p.iii/ph.5/l.1–2) F.G. Buck Rodgers, author of *The IBM Way*

Data No. 272

To focus on technique is “like” **cramming your way through school**. (Part.1/p.21/ph4/l.1–2)

The intensifiers in the data numbers 61, 139, and 153 show minimizing sense of change and moderate intensity of a process or act. Besides, attitudinal lexis in data numbers 112 and 119 expresses struggle but in a less extreme by using the word “fizzle” which means a slow loss of motivation rather than failure and “pressured and hassled” which conveys discomfort but stops short of severe distress. Lastly, metaphors and similes in data 38 and 272 also show downscale meaning. The bolded part in data number 38 suggests that productivity is hindered but not entirely blocked, implying a solution is within reach. Likewise, the bolded part in data number 272 introduces comparison rather than absolute equivalence, reducing the critique’s severity. To conclude, these downscaling-force devices shape how readers perceive the ideas presented by moderating intensity, limiting impact, and introducing ambiguity.

3.2. Catagorizing Attitude through Focus Dimension (Sharpening and Softening)

The second dimension of graduation is the focus, which relates to sharpening or softening various categories and experiential taxonomies. Evaluating or assessing something as a prototype of an experiential product can be done by reinforcing or relaxing the writer’s conceptualization of a particular taxonomy as conveyed to the reader. The process of reinforcing or relaxing an expression or thought is referred to as focus. Different from the force dimension, the focus dimension is not graded. In addition, sharpening focus is more frequently used than softening focus. The followings show the sharpening and softening focus in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Data No. 65

The seven habits represent a holistic, integrated approach to personal and interpersonal effectiveness, and that more than in the individual habits themselves, the **real key** lies in the relationship among them and in how they are

sequenced. (p.9/ph.3/l.5–10)

Data No. 101

There is no **real excellence** in all this world which can be separated from right living. David Starr Jordan (part 1, p.15/l.1)

Data No. 183

The character Ethic taught that there are basic principles of effective living, and that people can only experience **true success** and enduring happiness as they learn and integrate this principle into their basic character (Part 1/p.18/ph5/l.1–4)

Data No. 45

This book contains the **kind of penetrating truth** about human nature that is usually found only in fiction. . (p.iv/ph6/l.1–3) Orson Scott Card, Winner of the Hugo and Nebula Awards.

Data No. 113

After a few weeks, I fizzle. **I just can’t seem to keep a promise** I make to myself (part 1/p.15/ph.4/l.4–5)

The bolded parts of data numbers 65, 101, and 183 serve to sharpen focus by reinforcing the categorical boundaries of the concepts being described. These phrases operate to definitively assert the prototypical nature of ideas, implying that what is being described embodies an ideal or an absolute standard. This sharpening of focus leaves little room for ambiguity, thereby positioning the concepts as unequivocal benchmarks for personal and interpersonal effectiveness, ethical living, and success.

Conversely, the examples from data 45 and data 113 illustrate the softening focus through bolded expressions. The language deliberately introduces a degree of uncertainty or approximation. The softening effect serves to moderate the categorical claims. In the case of data 45, the truth of human nature is acknowledged as less absolute and more subjectively perceived. Meanwhile, the example of data 113 shows that the speaker’s self-assessment is less categorical and more tentative. This softening focus thus invites readers to view these concepts as less rigidly defined and more open to interpretation.

4. Discussion

In discussing the intensity of graduation, this study focuses on how strong or weak the author’s stance is as conveyed within the text. As explained by Martin and

Rose^[15], Graduation is categorized into two main characteristics: Force and Focus. Force refers to the subsystem of graduation related to the degree of intensity—either increasing or decreasing—the writer’s attitude toward the subject matter presented to the reader. Force is divided into four categories: intensifiers, attitudinal lexis, metaphors, and swearing. Meanwhile, Focus deals with either sharpening or softening the writer’s message directed toward the reader or listener.

The analysis of the motivational text reveals that force is significantly more dominant than focus, which appears less frequently. This finding suggests that Covey, in communicating his thoughts, principles, and values, relies more on gradable force than non-gradable focus. This pattern highlights Covey’s effort to convince his readers by employing diction with a clear degree of intensity, referred to by Martin and Rose^[15] as the lexis of attitude and intensifiers. Several examples of such diction that indicate a high degree of intensity include overwhelmingly positive, the best guarantee, the highest achievers, and supremely important. These words function to upscale the evaluation of particular aspects.

Moreover, this study identifies that the most frequently used Force in Covey’s book is attitudinal lexis. Among the categories of Force, attitudinal lexis dominates over intensifiers and metaphors. Although metaphor and simile are also present, their occurrences are relatively limited. Interestingly, this motivational text contains no instances of swearing, further confirming the author’s persuasive yet polite communication style.

In fictional texts such as a novel entitled *The Great Gatsby*, it was found that the dominance of attitudinal lexis aimed to convey the author’s evaluative stance indirectly, enhancing aesthetic richness and ideological depth^[20]. Both Covey’s motivational book and Fitzgerald’s novel rely heavily on attitudinal lexis to build stance and persuasion. However, while Covey’s use is explicit and motivational, Fitzgerald’s in *The Great Gatsby* is more implicit and narrative-driven, aiming to enrich character and theme depiction rather than guide behavior directly. Another study also found that the use of force in academic oral presentation (spoken discourse) reflects developing critical thinking and evaluative skills through intensification and quantification^[21]. The alignment between the spoken and written

discourse supports the view that evaluative and persuasive genres consistently favor force over focus.

As for the Focus category, the findings indicate that its use is mainly experiential, with non-gradable elements appearing less frequently in the motivational text. This suggests that Covey employs sharpening strategies rather than softening when conveying his thoughts. In other words, Covey presents his ideas directly and assertively rather than through indirect or softened expressions. Similar findings were observed in a study, which analyzed news coverage of the Bali Nine executions using the Appraisal framework^[22]. Their study revealed that journalistic texts also tend to rely heavily on high force (up-scaling) and attitudinal lexis to strengthen the news delivery and leave a strong impression on the reader. The use of such strategies serves to intensify the impact and emotional engagement of the audience. However, different from the research, news reports tend to use focus (sharpening) over force. Within force, the use of attitudinal lexis or intensifiers is limited as the journalistic genre requires neutrality and objectivity^[23]. Sharpening in focus was used to emphasize key information without overt subjectivity.

The findings also indicate that the intensity of meaning within the motivational text fluctuates, encompassing both up-scaling and down-scaling. Intensifiers are often employed to compare entities or to express the writer’s strong feelings toward a person or subject. As Martin and Rose^[15] explain: “They are used to compare things; to say how strongly the writer/speaker feels about someone or something, by comparison to something else, and it is gradable.” The data demonstrates that the text heavily utilizes up-scaling attitudinal lexis and intensifiers. Given that the original text is written in English, up-scaling expressions are more dominant. This aligns with Martin and Rose’s observation that English texts generally provide more linguistic resources for turning the volume up rather than down. The use of up-scaling intensifiers functions not only to strengthen the intensity of evaluation but also to compare the qualities of the evaluated aspects. As a sub-device of appraisal, intensifiers highlight the scalability of attitude, reflected in intensity or amount. While up-scaling intensifiers amplify quality and comparison (e.g., the highest rank, the most important, overwhelmingly positive), down-scaling intensifiers lower the quality or suggest

reduced intensity (e.g., slowly evolved, a very difficult, a little trust).

The data also confirms that attitudinal lexis is the most frequently used graduation device within the motivational book, particularly for evaluating people or phenomena, with a predominant focus on up-scaling. As Martin and White^[4] explain, “Attitudinal lexis is evaluative lexis which inscribes attitude according to appraisal theory. They should be understood as lexical items which mainly or almost exclusively express attitudinal meaning.” Interestingly, the findings show that not all attitudinal lexis carries positive or up-scaling values (e.g., remarkable, professional, tremendous). Some express negative polarity and down-scaling evaluations (e.g., pressured, hassled, forceful). Such a negative lexicon is employed to evaluate human characters that do not align with community values.

Metaphors and similes, as appraisal sub-devices, offer evaluative expressions through figurative language. In this context, people, objects, or phenomena are assessed through figurative comparisons. In contrast, similes use “like” or “as” metaphors to convey comparisons implicitly. Although figurative language is not extensively used in the text, both positive and negative metaphors contribute to the evaluative tone. Up-scaling metaphors enhance positive images of people or events, such as comparing Stephen Covey to Socrates or depicting his seven habits as “seven dishes that give life.” Conversely, down-scaling metaphors reduce the quality or value of specific actions or behaviors, such as “cramming your way through” or “mostly lip service.”

The second dimension of graduation, focus, concerns the strategy of sharpening or softening experiential categories and taxonomies. Through sharpening, writers accentuate specific values or categories, while softening renders the message less direct. Unlike Force, Focus is non-gradable. Examples include words such as true, real, genuine (e.g., “He’s a true friend”). According to Martin and White^[4], the rhetorical effect of sharpening maximizes the writer’s alignment with the value position being promoted, thereby strengthening the reader’s engagement.

In contrast, softening reduces the writer’s investment in a particular stance, often functioning as a conciliatory gesture to maintain solidarity with readers who might hold differing views. However, the effect of softening can

sometimes create ambiguity or distortion, potentially leading to misinterpretation. While this motivational book’s sharpening examples are limited, they provide interesting insights. For instance, the strong alignment toward the “7 Habits” reflects Covey’s maximal investment in presenting these habits as a holistic approach to life. This sharpening technique underscores the perceived value of becoming an effective person. The instances of softening in “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” are relatively few but noteworthy. Such strategies serve to moderate statements, as illustrated by phrases like “I just can’t seem to keep a promise” or “We just don’t love each other anymore.” Softening also operates as an indirect communication strategy, utilizing words like somehow, just, the kind of, which tend to obscure meaning and increase the risk of misinterpretation. One example of this indirect strategy is found in the reader’s response: “This book contains the kind of penetrating truth about human nature.” Another instance is “He was basically inadequate, somehow behind,” where the use of somehow softens the judgment. Although this strategy seeks to maintain engagement and solidarity, it may also distort communication if the softened message is misperceived.

The research findings give practical benefits for those who are engaged in teaching English on how to select words that motivate and persuade readers. In addition, these findings also show the importance of how graduation devices (force and focus) create meanings and tones in writing and spoken discourses. Therefore, these can also be applied in translation practices to maintain the graduation devices in various genres.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates how graduation in the appraisal system, specifically force and focus, shapes meaning and persuasion in discourse. The findings reveal that force—through intensifiers, attitudinal lexis, and metaphors—amplifies meaning, while focus refines categorization by sharpening or softening distinctions. The frequent use of force suggests an authorial intent to strengthen evaluation and engagement, whereas focus provides subtlety and nuance. By applying Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to analyze textual data, this study enhances our understanding of how linguistic choices influence inter-

pretation. These insights are relevant to discourse analysis, translation studies, and rhetorical strategies, emphasizing the role of linguistic resources in effective communication.

However, this study is limited to a single text from the motivational genre—Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. While this in-depth analysis offers valuable insight into one influential work, it may not reflect the broader patterns of graduation use in other motivational books or persuasive genres. Future research could expand on this study by comparing multiple authors or including cross-cultural data to investigate whether similar graduation strategies appear in other motivational texts across languages, cultures, or audiences. Additionally, further studies could analyze reader reception to see how different graduation strategies affect interpretation and impact.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, L.B, M.N, R.S, and T.W.; methodology, L.B, M.N, R.S, and T.W.; validation, M.N, R.S, and T.W.; formal analysis, L.B and M.N.; investigation, L.B, M.N, R.S, and T.W.; writing—original draft preparation, L.B. and M.N.; writing—review and editing, R.S and T.W.; supervision, M.N, R.S, and T.W.; project administration, M.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The data in this study are confidential and cannot be assessed by the third party.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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