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## AXIOLOGICAL VOCABULARY IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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### **SUMMARY**

*This study investigates how axiological vocabulary – lexical items encoding values and evaluative judgments – functions as a marker of public discourse in English. Drawing on four texts representing two genres (political speeches and opinion journalism) and two national contexts (the United States and the United Kingdom), the analysis identifies and categorises value-laden lexical items, examines their semantic and pragmatic functions, and compares patterns of usage across texts. The dataset comprises B. Obama's Selma anniversary address (2015), B. Johnson's COVID-19 broadcast (2020), a Guardian opinion article by J. Okundaye on intolerance in Britain (2026), and a Hill essay by H. Zeiger on civic values in the United States (2026). Using critical discourse analysis and the appraisal framework, the study conducts lexical-semantic,*

*thematic, and pragmatic-functional analyses. The findings show that axiological vocabulary clusters into coherent thematic fields shaped by genre, rhetorical purpose, and communicative situation. Four axiological modes are identified – affirming, balancing, critiquing, and reconciling – each corresponding to a different rhetorical orientation toward values. Evaluative language in public discourse is shown to function not merely descriptively but as a dynamic tool for constructing and negotiating moral and ideological meaning. The study contributes to English philology, discourse analysis, and media literacy by demonstrating how evaluative language adapts across genres and national contexts, offering a framework for comparative analysis of public discourse.*

**Keywords:** *axiological vocabulary, evaluative language, public discourse, critical discourse analysis, appraisal framework, political speeches, opinion journalism*

**Introduction.** Public discourse is where societies negotiate what matters most. Political speeches, editorials, and opinion columns not only inform but also articulate evaluative positions. They tell audiences what is fair or unjust, courageous or cowardly, worthy of praise or condemnation. The words that carry these judgments – terms like *freedom, dignity, bigotry, or sacrifice* – constitute what linguists refer to as axiological vocabulary: lexical items that encode moral values, evaluative judgments, or ideological positions. While Anglophone scholarship more commonly uses the umbrella term evaluative language, the term *axiological vocabulary* is adopted here for its precision, referring specifically to the lexical level at which values are encoded.

**Topicality.** Such language shapes how audiences interpret events, perceive social actors, and form opinions on contested issues. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has long recognised that language is not a neutral vehicle for information but a form of social action that reflects and reinforces ideological positions (Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 2006). Within this tradition, value-laden words function as discursive markers – linguistic signals revealing the moral and ideological orientation of a text. (Lakoff 2004) has shown how framing political language around core moral concepts can reshape how audiences understand social reality. Appraisal theory (Martin & White 2005) offers further tools for analysing how speakers and writers deploy evaluative resources to align with or distance themselves from particular

positions, distinguishing between attitudinal meaning, dialogic positioning, and the grading of evaluative force.

Scholarly attention to evaluative language in media and politics has grown considerably (Bednarek 2006; Alba-Juez, Thompson 2014), yet certain gaps remain. Comparative work examining how value-laden language operates across both genres and national varieties of English is relatively scarce. Political speeches and opinion journalism share a broadly persuasive purpose, yet they deploy evaluative resources under different institutional constraints, for different audiences, and through different rhetorical conventions. These distinct communicative situations are likely to produce different evaluative strategies.

This study addresses that gap from the perspective of English philology, which is concerned not only with the structural properties of English but with how meaning is constructed in real communicative contexts. The findings also carry implications for media literacy and language education by highlighting how evaluative language frames public issues.

The **aim** of this study is to investigate how axiological vocabulary serves as a marker of public discourse in English, with attention to its semantic content, pragmatic effects, and variation across genres and national contexts. The following **objectives** have been set:

1) to identify and categorise value-laden lexical items in selected English-language public discourse texts representing political oratory and opinion journalism from the United States and the United Kingdom;

2) to analyse the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of the identified items – how they convey approval, disapproval, moral evaluation, and ideological positioning;

3) to examine patterns of usage across text types and national contexts, with particular focus on how different communicative situations produce distinct rhetorical orientations toward values.

Beyond identifying evaluative vocabulary, the study seeks to characterise the recurrent rhetorical orientations through which public texts engage with values – conceptualised here as axiological modes. This concept, developed inductively from the data, is introduced in the Results and Discussion section as a framework for cross-textual comparison.

The **research materials** comprise four texts representing two genres of public discourse across two national contexts. The political speech genre is represented by Barack Obama’s Remarks at the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches (2015), a commemorative address on civil rights and American identity, and Boris Johnson’s Prime Minister’s Address to the Nation on Coronavirus (2020), a crisis-management broadcast justifying public health restrictions. The opinion journalism genre is represented by Jason Okundaye’s “Minorities in Adverts Are Menaced, Footballers Observing Ramadan Are Boed. Is This the Britain We Want?”, published in *The Guardian* in March 2026, a critical commentary on rising racial and religious intolerance in Britain, and Hans Zeiger’s “America’s Collective Civic Values Outweigh Its Divisions”, published in *The Hill* in February 2026, a reflective essay on shared civic commitments in the United States.

The texts were selected according to three **criteria**: 1) each addresses a matter of public concern and contains a substantial density of explicitly value-laden language; 2) each represents a distinct communicative situation and rhetorical purpose – commemoration, crisis management, social critique, and civic reflection; and 3) together they form a balanced two-by-two matrix – two political speeches and two opinion articles, two American and two British texts – enabling systematic comparison across both genre and national context. All four texts engaged directly with questions of national identity and collective values, providing thematic comparability across the dataset. Each also received significant public attention at the time of its delivery or publication, ensuring that the analysed language operated within an active and consequential discursive context. The selected material spans the period 2015–2026. The texts are treated as instances of distinct communicative situations rather than as a diachronic sequence; the analytical focus is on how genre, rhetorical purpose, and national context shape evaluative language, not on historical change over time.

The study employs a qualitative methodology drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) and the appraisal framework (Martin, White 2005). CDA provides the overarching

interpretive orientation, treating language choices as reflections and constructions of ideological positions. The appraisal framework serves as a sensitising framework for classifying evaluative resources, particularly within the domain of Attitude (Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation). The analysis was conducted in three stages: 1) lexical-semantic analysis – close reading of each text to identify evaluative lexemes and collocations on the basis of their capacity to convey positive or negative evaluation in context (Bednarek 2006); 2) thematic categorisation – grouping of the extracted items into semantic fields reflecting the dominant value orientations of each text, with items classified by evaluative polarity; and 3) pragmatic-functional and comparative analysis – examination of the discourse functions served by evaluative vocabulary in each text, followed by cross-textual comparison of evaluative density, dominant value fields, and rhetorical orientation toward values. Given the compact dataset, the analysis relies on close reading and representative examples rather than statistical frequency counts.

Specifically, a lexical item was treated as axiological if it met three converging criteria: its core meaning involved a judgment of moral worth, social desirability, or ideological value; it functioned evaluatively in context by positioning actors, events, or conditions as praiseworthy or blameworthy; and its removal or substitution would materially alter the evaluative orientation of the surrounding passage. No pre-existing lexicon was applied; identification relied on the analyst's semantic and pragmatic judgment, consistent with standard qualitative practice in CDA.

**Results and Discussion.** Close reading of the four texts revealed a wide range of axiological vocabulary across all sources. However, the density, thematic focus, and rhetorical deployment of value-laden language differed markedly between them.

B. Obama's Selma speech proved the most densely saturated, with over 40 distinct evaluative items identified across four semantic categories. B. Johnson's COVID-19 address contained a narrower range, concentrated around safety and duty. Among the opinion pieces, J. Okundaye's *Guardian* article was rich in negatively marked language – particularly terms of moral condemnation – while Zeiger's *Hill* essay was distinctive in

treating civic values both as its subject matter and as a rhetorical instrument.

These observations suggest a central pattern: evaluative vocabulary in public discourse rarely appears in isolation. Instead, it clusters into thematic fields shaped by genre, rhetorical purpose, and communicative situation.

The analysis first examined the semantic content of the identified vocabulary, then its pragmatic functions, before developing a comparative framework across the four texts. For this purpose, the items were grouped into thematic categories reflecting the dominant value orientations of each text.

The densest value field in B. Obama's speech (Obama 2015) centred on moral and social justice. Positively marked terms – *courage, justice, dignity, hope, freedom* – formed the evaluative backbone, interwoven with negatively marked counterparts naming historical wrongs: *the stain of slavery, the yoke of segregation, tyranny, wanton violence*.

A distinctive feature was axiological stacking – the chaining of multiple evaluative adjectives for cumulative effect. The phrase “*the idea of a just America and a fair America, an inclusive America, and a generous America*” exemplifies this strategy. As J. R. Martin and P. R. White (2005) note, such accumulation of attitudinal resources intensifies evaluative force and invites the audience into affective alignment with the speaker.

By contrast, B. Johnson's address (Johnson 2020) was organised around a different value field: safety and protection.

The virus itself was framed through strongly negative evaluative language – *the most vicious threat, invisible killer, devilish illness* – personifying the disease and casting the health crisis in quasi-wartime moral terms. This strategy aligns with what N. Fairclough (Fairclough 1995) describes as the ideological work of metaphor in public discourse: by casting the virus as a moral enemy, B. Johnson transformed a medical situation into a narrative of collective moral struggle.

A secondary value field centred on sacrifice and duty: *fortitude, bravery, devotion, self-sacrifice, everyday acts of kindness*. These terms reframed civic compliance as heroism – a strategy termed here axiological inflation, whereby routine behaviour (staying

home, following guidelines) is elevated through evaluative vocabulary to the status of moral virtue.

Turning to the opinion journalism genre, J. Okundaye's article (Okundaye 2026) presented tolerance as its primary value field but invoked it to highlight its erosion rather than its presence.

Positively marked terms (*tolerance, solidarity, compassion, unity*) appeared throughout, yet they consistently pointed to what was missing. The phrase "*intolerance is increasingly in vogue*" captures this precisely – a fashion metaphor applied to moral regression.

The article's most densely populated category was negatively marked discrimination vocabulary: *demonising, Islamophobia, racist abuse, hateful, open bigotry, the cruellest rhetoric, climate of terror and fear*. These formed an unbroken chain of condemnation directed at both social attitudes and political actors. As T. A. Van Dijk (Van Dijk 2006) argues, such explicit naming of discriminatory practices in media discourse serves not only an evaluative but also a delegitimising function – stripping those practices of any claim to normalcy.

H. Zeiger's essay (Zeiger 2026) was structured around civic and constitutional values: civic responsibility, defending freedom, following the Constitution, public-spiritedness, social responsibility. A notable lexical feature was the deliberate revival of archaic civic vocabulary – most strikingly public-spiritedness, a term associated with the American Founders, reintroduced as an aspirational ideal for contemporary politics. This historicising strategy anchored the essay's evaluative framework in constitutional tradition, lending its value claims the weight of institutional continuity.

Unlike the other three texts, where values were presented through a single authorial lens, H. Zeiger drew on survey data from the Beacon Project (More in Common 2026) to show how the same values are weighted differently across groups. For instance, "being patriotic" was endorsed as important by 73% of Republican respondents but only 52% of Democrats, while "protesting unfairness" was supported by 65% of Democrats versus 46% of Republicans. In the essay, these figures functioned less as statistical evidence than as an illustration of how the same

value terms carry different weight across political and generational groups.

Distinctively, the essay's negative evaluative markers – tribalism, fragmentation, political warfare, atomistic – targeted not opposing groups but abstract tendencies threatening civic cohesion. This distinguished Zeiger's negative vocabulary from that of the other three texts, where condemnation was directed at identifiable historical, biological, or political targets.

Beyond semantic content, the identified evaluative items served distinct pragmatic functions – shaping audience perception and positioning each text ideologically. In B. Obama's speech, evaluative vocabulary served primarily to legitimate a moral narrative. The marchers were constructed as embodiments of the highest American ideals, and the audience was positioned as their heirs – moral agents with an obligation to act. A particularly powerful strategy was axiological redefinition: the reassignment of familiar value terms to new meanings. Patriotism was redefined not as uncritical loyalty but as willingness to challenge the nation – “what greater form of patriotism is there than the belief that America is not yet finished” (Obama 2015). As G. Lakoff (Lakoff 2004) observes, the power to redefine a value term is the power to reshape the moral frame through which an issue is understood.

B. Johnson's speech faced a distinct pragmatic challenge: justifying restrictions on freedom while maintaining trust. This produced a strategy of axiological subordination – the temporary ranking of one core value below another.

Freedom was named explicitly at the outset (“*restrictions on their freedom – your freedom*”) and acknowledged as a fundamental value. Yet it was positioned as necessarily yielding to safety. The phrase “*it would be madness now to throw away that achievement*” illustrates how negative evaluation (*madness*) foreclosed dissent, framing any challenge to restrictions as irrational rather than principled.

Simultaneously, the language of sacrifice (*your effort and sacrifice, the fortitude of the elderly, incredible bravery*) validated compliance, transforming obedience into something noble. This dual strategy – restricting freedom while honouring those who accept

the restriction – represents a pragmatic balancing act less visible in the other texts. Together, axiological subordination and axiological inflation formed a complementary pair: the first managed the conflict between values, while the second compensated for the cost of compliance by elevating it morally.

J. Okundaye employed evaluative vocabulary not to celebrate values or justify policy but to indict a perceived moral failure in British political life.

The article's most distinctive strategy was meta-axiological critique: quoting the value-laden language of others to expose its hollowness. When Keir Starmer is cited calling Britain “a proud, tolerant and diverse country”, the axiological stacking is not endorsed – it is held up for scrutiny, with the surrounding argument showing these claimed values are contradicted by the government's own actions. Similarly, when words like *swamped* and *colonised* are quoted from other figures, they are presented as value-laden language deployed not to affirm ideals but to dehumanise.

This meta-level engagement distinguishes the article from the political speeches, where values are presented more directly and less reflexively.

A further dimension of this strategy was the implicit ranking of public figures by their moral authority to speak on values. Through evaluative vocabulary, the article established a hierarchy of credibility – from sincere but powerless voices, through hollow official rhetoric, to language used to dehumanise.

Zeiger's essay used evaluative vocabulary not to advocate or condemn but to reconcile. The text sought to demonstrate that Americans share more evaluative common ground than polarised debate suggests.

Value-laden language served both descriptive and prescriptive purposes: the essay described which values different groups endorse, then shifted register to urge *tolerance and forbearance*, *mutual respect*, and *social responsibility* as the appropriate response to disagreement. This movement from description to prescription is notable: the essay used evaluative vocabulary to discuss evaluative commitments. Values thus became simultaneously its object of analysis and its rhetorical instrument. The pragmatic effect was

conciliatory, normalising value disagreement rather than framing it as crisis.

Broader patterns emerged when the four texts were compared directly. The political speeches exhibited higher concentrations of value-laden vocabulary than the opinion articles, particularly B. Obama’s address – consistent with M. Bednarek’s (2006) observation that evaluative language clusters more densely in texts designed for persuasive impact. The opinion articles distributed evaluative content more unevenly, interspersing value judgments with factual reporting (J. Okundaye) or survey data (Zeiger). This suggests that genre conventions influence not only whether evaluative vocabulary appears but how densely and consistently it is deployed.

As introduced earlier, each text engaged with values in a distinctly different way. These orientations – termed axiological modes in this study – are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

**Axiological Modes Across the Four Texts**

	<b>Affirming (Obama)</b>	<b>Balancing (Johnson)</b>	<b>Critiquing (Okundaye)</b>	<b>Reconciling (Zeiger)</b>
Rhetorical orientation	Values celebrated as defining national identity	Competing values weighed; one temporarily prioritised	Values invoked to expose their absence or betrayal	Shared values identified across divides
Dominant value field	Moral and social justice	Safety and civic duty	Tolerance and discrimination	Civic responsibility and constitutional ideals
Key evaluative strategy	Axiological stacking; axiological redefinition	Axiological subordination; axiological inflation	Meta-axiological critique	Descriptive-prescriptive evaluative structure
Direction of negative evaluation	Historical injustice (tyranny, stain, yoke)	Biological threat (vicious, devilish, killer)	Political actors and social attitudes (bigotry, demonising)	Abstract social tendencies (tribalism, fragmentation)
Audience positioned as	Heirs to a moral legacy	Dutiful citizens making sacrifices	Witnesses to moral decay	Members of a shared civic project
Genre	Commemorative political speech	Crisis-management address	Critical opinion journalism	Reflective/analytical opinion essay

These modes produce different relationships between text and audience. Affirming invites identification with a shared moral heritage. Balancing asks the audience to accept a temporary evaluative hierarchy. Critiquing compels recognition of hypocrisy. Reconciling offers the reassurance that common ground persists beneath disagreement. Each mode therefore represents not only a textual pattern but also a distinct way of engaging audiences through evaluative language.

This framework may prove applicable beyond the present dataset. T. A. Van Dijk (Van Dijk 2006) has noted that ideological discourse operates through the systematic foregrounding of positive self-representation and negative other-representation – a pattern visible in all four modes, though realised differently in each. The variation in targets of negative evaluation supports this model. What the present analysis adds is that the nature of the target – historical, biological, political, or abstract – shapes the form of condemnation and serves as a reliable indicator of each text's ideological orientation and genre conventions.

Both American texts drew on values associated with the US political tradition – *freedom, patriotism, the Constitution, self-government*. The British texts engaged more with *tolerance, solidarity*, and collective resilience. This broadly reflects what N. Fairclough (Fairclough 1995) describes as the embedding of discourse within culturally specific ideological formations – the available vocabulary of values is partly shaped by national political traditions and their canonical reference points.

Yet the communicative situation – the occasion, audience, and rhetorical challenge – appeared to shape evaluative vocabulary more directly than nationality alone. B. Obama and J. Okun-daye, writing in different countries and genres, both engaged extensively with racial justice. B. Johnson and H. Zeiger, despite their shared Anglophone context, constructed almost entirely different value fields. This suggests that while national context provides a repertoire of available evaluative resources, it is the specific discursive situation that determines which resources are activated and how they are deployed.

**Conclusions.** This study examined how axiological vocabulary marks public discourse in English, focusing on its

semantic content, pragmatic effects, and variation across genres and national contexts.

Axiological vocabulary does not appear randomly in the analysed texts. It organises into coherent thematic fields shaped by communicative situation: moral and social justice (B. Obama), safety and civic duty (B. Johnson), tolerance and discrimination (J. Okundaye), civic responsibility and constitutional ideals (H. Zeiger).

At the pragmatic level, evaluative vocabulary served distinct functions: legitimating a moral narrative, justifying restrictions on freedom, exposing political hypocrisy, and reconciling civic disagreements. These functions were captured through the concept of axiological modes – affirming, balancing, critiquing, and reconciling – proposed here as a framework for understanding how public discourse engages with values.

Genre conventions significantly influenced the density and patterning of value-laden language, with political speeches exhibiting denser, more concentrated evaluation than opinion journalism. The direction of negatively marked vocabulary also proved analytically productive: each text condemned a different target – historical injustice, a biological threat, political actors, or abstract social tendencies – and this targeting served as a reliable indicator of ideological orientation.

These findings have implications across several areas. In discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, axiological vocabulary merits close comparative attention as a structural feature marking genre, ideology, and rhetorical purpose. Although the axiological modes were developed on a compact dataset, they may provide a transferable framework for analysing a broader range of public discourse. In English philology, the study demonstrates how a single language system produces different evaluative textures depending on context. For media literacy and language education, the findings highlight the importance of recognising how evaluative language frames issues, positions audiences, and encodes ideological stances.

The study has limitations. The dataset is compact, the analysis qualitative and interpretive, and the proposed axiological modes were derived inductively from a specific set of texts. Future

research might expand the dataset to include parliamentary proceedings, broadcast interviews, or social media discourse, and employ mixed methods combining qualitative analysis with corpus-linguistic tools. A diachronic dimension – tracing how axiological vocabulary shifts over time – and a cross-linguistic perspective extending beyond Anglophone contexts would also be productive avenues.

This study demonstrates that axiological vocabulary is not merely descriptive but a dynamic tool through which public discourse constructs and negotiates moral and ideological meaning.

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## АКСІОЛОГІЧНА ЛЕКСИКА В АНГЛОМОВНОМУ ПУБЛІЧНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ

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### **АНОТАЦІЯ**

У дослідженні аналізується функціонування аксіологічної лексики – одиниць словника, які виражають цінності та оцінні судження – як маркера публічного дискурсу англійською мовою. На матеріалі чотирьох текстів, що представляють два жанри (політичні промови та публіцистика) і два національні контексти (США та Великобританія), здійснено ідентифікацію та класифікацію оцінних лексичних одиниць, проаналізовано їхні семантичні й прагматичні функції та зіставлено моделі вживання в різних текстах. Матеріалом слугують: промова Обами з нагоди 50-річчя маршів із Сельми до Монтомери (2015), телезвернення Джонсона щодо COVID-19 (2020), стаття Окундає в «The Guardian» про нетерпимість у Британії (2026) та есе Цайгера в «The Hill» про громадянські цінності в США (2026). Із застосуванням критичного дискурс-аналізу та теорії оцінювання здійснено лексико-семантичний, тематичний та прагматико-функціональний аналізи. Встановлено, що аксіологічна лексика групується в когерентні тематичні поля, зумовлені жанром, риторичною метою та комунікативною ситуацією. Виокремлено чотири аксіологічні модуси (афірмативний, балансуючий, критичний і примирювальний), кожен із яких відповідає певній риторичній настанові щодо цінностей. Доведено, що мова оцінювання у публічному дискурсі функціонує не лише дескриптивно, але і як динамічний інструмент конструювання та узгодження

морального й ідеологічного змісту. Дослідження робить внесок в англійську філологію, дискурс-аналіз та медіаграмотність, демонструючи, як мова оцінювання адаптується залежно від жанру та національного контексту, та пропонуючи схему для порівняльного аналізу публічного дискурсу.

**Ключові слова:** аксіологічна лексика, мова оцінювання, публічний дискурс, критичний дискурс-аналіз, теорія оцінювання, політичні промови, публіцистичні статті.

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