



Appraising Emotions and Interpersonal Meaning in Contemporary Disney Animated Films for Children

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Abstract

The current study investigates the representation of interpersonal meaning and emotional positioning in recent Disney animated films targeted at children, using the Appraisal framework developed by Martin and White [16]. Specifically, the study examines how they construct attitude, negotiate stance, and intensify or soften evaluations across seven popular titles: Inside Out 2 [7], Moana 2 [18], Elemental [20], Wish [4], Luca [5], Moana [9], and Inside Out [6]. These films, globally consumed by young audiences, play a significant role in shaping early understandings of emotions, identity, and relationships. Through the use of the Appraisal Theory Tagger [1], a web-based tool developed to annotate linguistic appraisal resources, with manual verification, 26,149 appraisal tokens were identified from 63,733 words of dialogue. Results show that Attitude dominates (49.1%), with affect and judgment especially frequent, while Engagement (31.3%) and Graduation (19.6%) vary depending on narrative focus. Films centered on adolescence and emotional regulation (e.g., Inside Out 2) emphasize Attitude and intensification, while those focused on intercultural negotiation (Elemental) privilege heteroglossic Engagement. High appraisal density in Luca and Moana 2 demonstrates that nearly every line carries evaluative meaning, providing children with abundant models of affective and moral vocabulary. These findings highlight that children's films are saturated with evaluation, functioning as linguistic environments that scaffold socioemotional learning. The discussion emphasizes the pedagogical implications: while some films label emotions explicitly, others foster dialogic diversity or amplify moral stance, offering different opportunities for language acquisition. The study concludes that animated films should be considered not only as cultural texts but also as semiotic resources with significant implications for emotional literacy, pragmatic competence, and applied linguistics research on incidental learning.

Keywords: Appraisal Theory, interpersonal meaning, children's media, Disney films, systemic functional linguistics, Appraisal Theory Tagger

1. Introduction

Children's animated films are among the most widely consumed forms of media by young audiences. Beyond their entertainment value, they provide children with early exposure to structured narratives, dialogue, and emotional expression. Such films present interpersonal meanings that help shape children's understanding of emotions, relationships, and social interaction. For applied linguists, they offer a rich domain for investigating how evaluative language is encountered outside the classroom and how it may contribute to language development.

Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Appraisal theory [16] offers a framework for analyzing interpersonal meaning in discourse. The framework captures how speakers and writers evaluate people and events (Attitude), negotiate stance with interlocutors and audiences (Engagement), and adjust the strength or sharpness of meaning (Graduation). These resources are central to children's socioemotional growth and pragmatic competence, as they provide models of how feelings, judgments, and values are expressed in authentic communication.

Although children's media has been studied from various linguistic and educational perspectives, there has been relatively little focus on how evaluative patterns are distributed across entire films using the Appraisal framework. This represents a gap in research, given that animated films expose children to repeated, emotionally charged language that may support both first- and second-language acquisition. A systematic account of appraisal in these texts can show not only which evaluative resources children encounter most frequently, but also how these resources contribute to the construction of narrative themes such as heroism, belonging, aspiration, and emotional regulation.

The present study addresses this gap by analyzing seven contemporary animated films: *Inside Out 2* [7], *Moana 2* [18], *Elemental* [20], *Wish* [4], *Luca* [5], *Moana* [9], and *Inside Out* [6]. Using the Appraisal Theory Tagger [1], the study examines the distribution of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, as well as the density of evaluative tokens relative to dialogue length. It asks three questions:



1. How are appraisal resources distributed across Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation in the selected films?
2. How do appraisal subsystems contribute to the construction and amplification of central narrative themes in children's media?
3. How does appraisal density (tokens per 1,000 words) vary, and what does this reveal about the input available to child audiences?

By answering these questions, the study contributes to the intersection of SFL, children's media discourse, and language acquisition. It demonstrates how films serve not only as cultural products but also as environments where evaluative meanings are made explicit, repeated, and emotionally salient for young viewers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Appraisal Theory and Interpersonal Meaning

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offers a powerful framework for understanding language as a semiotic system organized around metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual [10]. Of these, the interpersonal metafunction provides a means of analyzing how speakers and writers position themselves in relation to others, construe authority, and express affective and evaluative stances. Appraisal theory [16] elaborates this metafunction by providing a taxonomy of resources through which evaluation is enacted: Attitude, encoding affect, judgment, and appreciation; Engagement, managing dialogic space; and Graduation, scaling meaning in terms of force and focus.

Appraisal has been widely employed to reveal the layered organization of evaluative meaning, connecting micro-level linguistic features to macro-level discursive positioning (e.g., [13], [14], [16], [23]). Its value lies in its capacity to connect micro-level lexico-grammatical choices to macro-level social positioning. However, despite this theoretical maturity, the application of Appraisal has often remained confined to written texts or narrow genres such as opinion writing and classroom interaction. The potential of Appraisal for interrogating children's audiovisual environments, texts that are arguably among the most pervasive sources of interpersonal modeling for young audiences, has been underexploited. This represents a significant gap, since animated films and television are not only entertainment but also pedagogical resources that implicitly teach children how to feel, judge, and evaluate. The present study builds directly on this theoretical heritage, applying Appraisal systematically to a corpus of children's animated films in order to illuminate how these multimodal narratives project interpersonal values and emotional categories.

2.2 Appraisal and Emotion in Children's Storytelling, Media and Literature

Research on children's narratives shows that affect is central to meaning-making. Ariztimuño, Dreyfus, and Moore [3] demonstrated how lexis and prosody combine to make affect audible. Ariztimuño [2] further showed in *Cinderella* retellings that verbal, vocal, and facial channels converge to intensify emotion, proposing a system of vocal semogenesis. These studies establish affect as multimodal but are small-scale and classroom-based, leaving unanswered how global media industrially packages evaluation. The present study shifts focus from child-as-producer to child-as-consumer, tracing how films embed recurring evaluative cues for young audiences.

Work on children's media and literature reinforces affect's primacy. Vidhiasi [22] found the *Paw Patrol* theme song relied almost exclusively on Graduation through intensification, while Mills et al. [17] showed affect and appreciation dominated children's digital films. Sujanto [21], analyzing *Geronimo Stilton*, reported a skew toward negative affect and little appreciation. Together, these studies confirm the dominance of affect but show limited engagement resources, raising concerns that children's exposure may privilege emotional intensity over dialogic nuance. Animated films, with their mix of music, dialogue, and repeated viewing, offer a broader testing ground for these dynamics.

Undergraduate research demonstrates both potential and limitations of film-based appraisal. Wijayanti [24] found *Turning Red* foregrounded judgment, while Rahmah [19] showed affect (especially security) dominated *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish*, with graduation largely downscaled. Though insightful, both studies are single-text analyses. By comparing seven films, this study advances beyond case-specific accounts toward a corpus-level understanding of evaluative patterns.

Digital studies add another layer: Harvey [11] showed YouTube story-time animations construct stance through narration, gesture, and sound, underscoring appraisal's multimodality. Yet such work remains tied to short, user-generated texts. By analyzing full-length professional films, the present study addresses this gap, mapping how Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation are systematically distributed in globally consumed children's media.



2.3 Media Exposure and Language Acquisition

Beyond discourse analysis, research in developmental psychology and applied linguistics has established that media environments shape children's language acquisition. Dynia et al. [8] found that heavier screen exposure predicted lower expressive language in toddlers from low-income homes, attributing this to the displacement of caregiver–child interaction. Jing et al.'s [14] meta-analysis across 63 studies, however, reported a small but positive effect of screen media on vocabulary learning, particularly for educational and interactive formats such as e-books. Karani et al., [15] synthesized this debate, concluding that outcomes hinge on content type, exposure duration, and parental mediation.

These findings underscore two crucial points for the present study. First, they establish empirically that children's media exposure is not neutral but actively conditions linguistic development. Second, they highlight the mechanisms that matter: density of input, type of evaluative resources modeled, and opportunities for dialogic negotiation. This provides a direct rationale for examining appraisal in animated films: by mapping the evaluative resources these texts embed, one can better understand what kinds of linguistic scaffolding children are encountering. Moreover, since animated films combine frequency of exposure with high affective salience, they represent a particularly powerful site for incidental language learning and socioemotional development.

2.4 Positioning the Present Study

Across the reviewed studies, three trends stand out: affect dominates children's discourse, cinematic studies remain fragmented and rarely focus on animation, and media exposure clearly shapes language development though evaluative language is underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by applying Appraisal theory to seven animated films, linking subsystem balance and density to children's socioemotional and linguistic input.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, text-based research design informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), with particular focus on Appraisal theory [16]. The analysis is descriptive and comparative, aiming to map how evaluative language is patterned across a sample of children's media. The approach is motivated by the relevance of children's audiovisual content as a linguistic resource that shapes early understandings of emotions, values, and social positioning. By focusing on dialogue in animated films, the study investigates how interpersonal meanings are construed in texts widely consumed by young audiences.

3.2 Corpus and Sampling

The corpus comprises seven recent children's films released between 2015 and 2024: *Inside Out 2* [7], *Moana 2* [18], *Elemental* [20], *Wish* [4], *Luca* [5], *Moana* [9], and *Inside Out* [6]. These titles were selected not because of their production company, but because they exemplify globally popular children's media with strong narrative focus on emotional development and interpersonal relationships. Their international circulation ensures that they serve as representative texts for examining how evaluative meanings are made accessible to child audiences in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. The sampling strategy is purposive, targeting films with pedagogically salient themes of identity, emotion, and social connection. Across all seven films, the corpus totals 63,733 words of English subtitle dialogue, providing a substantial dataset for analysis. Table 1 presents the distribution of words per film.

Table 1. Corpus Size by Film

Film	Number of Words
Inside Out	9,571
Moana	6,819
Luca	7,773
Wish	11,738



Elemental	7,282
Inside Out 2	11,595
Moana 2	8,955
Total	63,733

3.3 Data Preparation

Film dialogue was obtained from official English subtitle files. Unlike many corpus studies that remove paralinguistic and multimodal cues, this study retained non-lexical sounds (e.g., sighs, laughter, gasps) and musical notations. These elements are integral to the way children's media conveys interpersonal meaning, often reinforcing or intensifying affect and evaluation. Preserving these notations provides a fuller representation of the discourse children encounter, even though the analysis focused on verbal tokens of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Subtitle segmentation was kept intact to maintain consistency with the text as experienced by viewers.

3.4 Analytical Tool and Procedure

The corpus was processed using the Appraisal Theory Tagger, a web-based tool designed to automatically annotate evaluative resources in English texts[1]. The tagger is grounded in Appraisal theory and identifies Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation resources by drawing on a curated lexical library that reflects the hierarchical structure of the framework. Its outputs consist of transcripts annotated with inline appraisal labels, which were then consolidated into spreadsheets for subsystem-level analysis. Although the tagger significantly accelerates analysis, it currently does not automatically annotate monoglossic clauses (Engagement items presented as bare assertions without dialogic alternatives). To address this limitation, all transcripts were manually reviewed to (a) identify and tag monoglossic clauses, (b) verify the accuracy of existing annotations, and (c) update the tagger's database with missing or misclassified appraisal items. This hybrid workflow ensured that the analysis captured the full range of Engagement resources and reduced the likelihood of systematic under-reporting or misclassification.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

Reliability was strengthened by combining automated annotation with systematic human verification. By manually checking each transcript, particularly for monoglossic clauses and ambiguous items, the researcher minimized over-tagging and under-tagging errors. This iterative process also enhanced the tagger's long-term performance by expanding its lexical coverage. Construct validity is supported by the tool's theoretical foundation in SFL-Appraisal, while external validity is bounded by the study's focus on English subtitle dialogue and the exclusion of multimodal cues such as gesture, intonation, and visual symbolism.

3.6 Limitations

Despite these measures, the study has limitations. First, relying on subtitles excludes prosodic, gestural, and visual cues central to meaning in children's media. Second, although the Appraisal Theory Tagger enabled large-scale annotation, it required manual supplementation for monoglossic clauses and may still contain minor tagging errors. Third, the corpus covers only seven English-language films, limiting generalizability to other media or languages.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the seven children's films yielded 26,149 appraisal tokens, demonstrating that dialogue in this genre is saturated with evaluative meaning. To ensure comparability, percentages reported in Tables 2 and 3 are calculated relative to the total number of appraisal tokens, not the total number of words in the transcripts. Each film's percentages therefore represent the internal balance of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, summing to 100%. By contrast, Table 3 reports appraisal density values, calculated as tokens per 1,000 running words of dialogue. Together, these measures capture both the profile of evaluative language and its frequency of occurrence within the texts.

4.1 Overall Subsystem Distribution



At the broadest level, the analysis establishes how interpersonal meaning is distributed across the three appraisal systems. Examining this overall balance is essential because it reveals which types of evaluation children are most frequently exposed to in audiovisual texts, and therefore which linguistic resources are most available for acquisition and socioemotional modeling.

Table 2 presents the overall distribution of appraisal resources across the corpus. Attitude dominates the corpus, representing almost half of all appraisal items. This emphasis shows that children's media privileges the explicit expression of feelings, judgments, and assessments, offering frequent input of affective lexis. For child viewers, such repeated exposure supports the development of emotion labeling and moral vocabulary, both of which are central to socioemotional growth and second-language acquisition. Engagement (31.3%) and Graduation (19.6%) occur less frequently but remain important for modeling how speakers negotiate stance and modulate meaning.

Table 2. Distribution of Appraisal Subsystems Across the Corpus

Subsystem	Frequency	Percentage of Appraisal Tokens
Attitude	12,827	49.1%
Engagement	8,188	31.3%
Graduation	5,134	19.6%
Total	26,149	100%

Note: Percentages are calculated relative to the total number of appraisal tokens across all seven films.

4.2 Subsystem Balance by Film

Beyond the corpus-wide picture, it is important to examine how appraisal subsystems are distributed within individual films. This level of analysis highlights how productions balance emotional stance, dialogic positioning, and scaling, thereby revealing the evaluative profile of each text and the linguistic input available to child audiences.

Examining each film's profile (see table 3) shows how appraisal subsystems align with central themes and motifs. In this way, differences in Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation emerge not as chronological trends but as patterns motivated by narrative purpose.

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages of Appraisal Subsystems by Film

Film	Attitude		Engagement		Graduation		Total Tokens
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Inside Out	1,071	47.1	933	41.0	271	12.0	2,275
Moana	1,335	44.1	1,127	37.2	566	18.7	3,028
Luca	1,648	44.2	1,373	36.8	707	19.0	3,728
Wish	2,611	50.8	1,526	29.7	1,006	19.5	5,143
Elemental	1,463	42.9	1,361	39.9	584	17.2	3,408
Inside Out 2	2,754	60.7	604	13.3	1,183	26.1	4,541
Moana 2	1,946	48.3	1,269	31.5	811	20.2	4,026

Note: Percentages are calculated as each subsystem's share of appraisal tokens within a single film; totals reflect the full number of appraisal tokens.

Attitude is consistently the most frequent subsystem, though its relative weight depends on narrative focus. *Inside Out 2* exhibits the strongest reliance (60.7%), reflecting its thematic preoccupation with adolescence and new emotions such as Anxiety. Affect resources dominate, as characters articulate fear, joy, and insecurity (e.g., "awooga," 00:06:07; "This is the worst," 00:25:18). Judgment also plays a key role in adventure-oriented films like *Moana*, where bravery and resilience are repeatedly evaluated ("the most daring of them all," 00:01:33). In *Luca*, evaluations of friendship and loyalty repeatedly surface, modeling how language encodes interpersonal trust and social belonging ("You missed," 00:02:19; "She can sense weakness," 00:07:09; "Sto imbecille thinks he can be a jerk," 00:32:59). In contrast, *Elemental* foregrounds Appreciation, aligning with its thematic concern for cultural traditions and valuing difference ("This shop is dream of our family," 00:05:34). These thematic emphases illustrate how Attitude resources are mobilized differently depending on whether the narrative centers on inner feelings, heroic quests, or social belonging.

Engagement is particularly pronounced in films where dialogue dramatizes negotiation of perspectives. *Inside Out* (41.0%) and *Elemental* (39.9%) rely on heteroglossic strategies, especially Entertain ("maybe you're right," 00:48:40), Attribute: Acknowledge ("you said it would be here

yesterday," 00:10:03), and Counter ("but think of all the good things," 00:16:48; "I guess," 00:27:54). These patterns mirror the themes of internal debate between emotions and intercultural negotiation, respectively. By contrast, *Inside Out 2* (13.3%) relies far more on Pronounce, presenting emotions categorically ("which, by the way, she is," 00:03:18; "I think that's overstating things a bit," 00:21:48). Thematically, this reflects its didactic orientation: emotions are presented as truths to be identified, rather than perspectives to be negotiated. This reduction in heteroglossic variety limits the modeling of dialogic diversity for child audiences.

Graduation resources rise in films that dramatize urgency and conflict. *Inside Out 2* (26.1%) and *Moana 2* (20.2%) employ frequent Intensification and Sharpening, amplifying emotional turbulence and heroic determination ("Whoa whoa whoa!", 00:02:46; "I can't wait till I retire," 00:04:50). This scaling of meaning heightens dramatic effect, making emotions vivid and accessible to children. In reflective films like *Wish*, Soften resources appear more often, creating a gentler evaluative tone ("You're kind of boring now," 00:08:38; "She said she just wanted her family to have their wishes back," 00:59:56). Thematically, then, Graduation resources help align the discourse with the affective trajectory of each story: intensification supports high-stakes conflict, while softening aligns with reflection and aspiration.

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that appraisal resources are not only distributed systematically across Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, but are also strategically mobilized to construct and amplify each film's central themes and motifs (see table 4). When narratives focus on inner emotions, Attitude is used to foreground affective states and moral positioning. Where negotiation and dialogue are central, Engagement resources expand or contract the dialogic space to reflect contested perspectives. In stories of conflict and resolution, Graduation intensifies or sharpens meaning, heightening the dramatic effect. In this way, appraisal language functions as a semiotic resource through which children's media articulates its narrative concerns and renders them emotionally and interpersonally salient for young audiences.

Table 4. Dominant Appraisal Subsystems and Narrative Themes by Film

Film	Dominant Subsystem(s)	Narrative Themes and Notes
Inside Out	Engagement (41.0%)	Internal debate between emotions; heavy use of Entertain and Counter reflects dialogic negotiation.
Moana	Attitude (44.1%) + Judgment	Heroic quest, resilience, destiny; evaluations of bravery and responsibility frame Moana's leadership role.
Luca	Attitude (44.2%) + Engagement (36.8%)	Friendship, identity, belonging; interplay of Attitude and Engagement reflects negotiation of difference and trust.
Wish	Attitude (50.8%)	Hope, aspiration, moral values; frequent affective tokens support the uplifting and inspirational tone.
Elemental	Engagement (39.9%)	Intercultural negotiation and belonging; high heteroglossic use (Entertain, Acknowledge) mirrors dialogue across difference.
Inside Out 2	Attitude (60.7%) + Graduation (26.1%)	Adolescence, anxiety, emotional regulation; Attitude foregrounds naming new emotions, Graduation heightens adolescent turmoil.
Moana 2	Attitude (48.3%) + Graduation (20.2%)	Heroism, resilience, collective struggle; intensifiers and sharpeners amplify determination and communal resilience.

Note: Percentages represent subsystem shares of appraisal tokens within each film (see Table 2).

Narrative themes are drawn from each film's central storyline, demonstrating how appraisal distributions align with narrative purpose.

4.3 Appraisal Density per 1,000 Words

While subsystem proportions capture evaluative profiles, they do not reveal how frequently evaluation occurs in relation to dialogue length. Table 5 presents appraisal density, expressed as tokens per 1,000 words. Appraisal density varies not by release year but by narrative orientation. Films with action-driven or relational plots show higher densities, as almost every line of dialogue carries evaluation. *Luca* (479.61) and *Elemental* (468.00) exemplify this: both stories revolve around interpersonal negotiation and cultural belonging, requiring frequent evaluative turns of phrase to advance the plot. Similarly, *Moana 2* (449.58) sustains high density as it dramatizes heroic struggle and communal resilience, with intensifiers and affective expressions punctuating nearly every exchange.



Table 5. Appraisal Density per 1,000 Words of Dialogue

Film	Total Words	Total Appraisal Tokens	Tokens per 1,000 words
Inside Out	9,571	2,275	237.70
Moana	6,819	3,028	444.05
Luca	7,773	3,728	479.61
Wish	11,738	5,143	438.15
Elemental	7,282	3,408	468.00
Inside Out 2	11,595	4,541	391.63
Moana 2	8,955	4,026	449.58

Note: Density values are calculated as appraisal tokens divided by total words per film, multiplied by 1,000.

By contrast, films with a more didactic orientation show lower density, even when evaluative proportions are high. *Inside Out 2* devotes the majority of its evaluative space to Attitude (60.7%), but its density (391.63) is lower than that of films like *Luca* or *Moana 2*. This suggests that while the film clearly labels emotions such as Anxiety, it offers fewer evaluative tokens per word of dialogue. The implication is that children are provided with clarity of categories but fewer repetitions, which may limit reinforcement and uptake. *Wish* (438.15) occupies a middle ground: although its central theme is hope and aspiration, its high appraisal density comes from frequent affective expressions of desire, longing, and moral alignment. This combination of positivity and frequency provides young viewers with abundant evaluative input in aspirational contexts.

4.4 Integrating Profile and Density

Considering subsystem proportions and density together provides a more complex picture. Films like *Wish* and *Moana 2* combine high Attitude shares with high density, offering both explicitness and frequency, which maximizes their potential as input for children's socioemotional and linguistic development. By contrast, *Inside Out 2* provides strong Attitude clarity but with fewer evaluative tokens overall, privileging categorization of emotions over repeated modeling of evaluative language. These contrasts highlight how themes mediate appraisal density. Films focused on heroism and communal struggle (e.g., *Moana 2*) rely on dense evaluative dialogue to escalate tension, while those concerned with emotional education (e.g., *Inside Out 2*) emphasize Attitude categories over density. For both first-language and second-language learners, the richest input comes from films where evaluative language is both frequent and diverse, as in *Luca*, *Elemental*, and *Wish*.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study analyzed seven globally circulated children's animated films through Appraisal theory, showing that evaluative language is not only pervasive but systematically distributed across Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Attitude emerged as the dominant subsystem, especially in films that foreground emotions or heroic quests. Engagement featured more in stories of negotiation and belonging, while Graduation was central in dramatizing conflict and intensifying affect. Appraisal density further revealed how frequently evaluative meanings saturate dialogue, confirming that appraisal is a defining feature of children's media discourse.

These findings carry implications for language acquisition and socioemotional development. Films with high Attitude and density, such as *Luca*, *Elemental*, and *Wish*, provide abundant input for affective vocabulary and pragmatic strategies. By contrast, *Inside Out 2* offers categorical clarity but fewer evaluative tokens, emphasizing emotional labeling over repetition. The decline of heteroglossic Engagement in some films limits opportunities for modeling dialogic negotiation, pointing to the need for complementary educational tasks that reintroduce hedging, attribution, and alternative perspectives. From an applied linguistics perspective, the study demonstrates that appraisal functions as a semiotic resource linking narrative themes to incidental language learning. Animated films can scaffold evaluative lexis, stance-taking strategies, and emotional literacy, making them valuable tools for digital and blended classrooms where communicative competence and socioemotional growth are intertwined.

Nonetheless, the study is limited by reliance on subtitle dialogue, the exclusion of multimodal cues, and the focus on English-language productions from one studio. Future research should adopt multimodal frameworks, compare non-English corpora, and investigate longitudinally how repeated exposure to evaluative input shapes language and socioemotional outcomes.



In sum, children's animated films should be viewed not only as cultural texts but as pedagogical resources that socialize young audiences into patterned ways of feeling, judging, and valuing—processes central to both identity formation and language development.

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