

**التجلي التركيبي للأفعال الكلامية في الخطاب
الدبلوماسي: التبرير ونزع الشرعية في مناقشات
مجلس الأمن التابع للأمم المتحدة حول غزة**

**Syntactic Realisation of Speech Acts in
Diplomatic Discourse: A Study of
Justification and Delegitimation in UN
Security Council Debates on Gaza**

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الكلمات المفتاحية: النحو الأدنى؛ الأفعال الكلامية؛ الخطاب السياسي؛ نزع الشرعية؛ التبرير؛
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المخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الكيفية والأسباب التي تجعل البنى النحوية تعمل كأدوات استراتيجية للإقناع في الخطاب الدبلوماسي، مع التركيز على مناقشات مجلس الأمن التابع للأمم المتحدة بشأن الصراع في غزة. وتتناول الدراسة الاستراتيجيات النحوية لنوعين رئيسيين من الأفعال الكلامية – التبرير ونزع الشرعية – الصادرين عن ممثلي الدول، وذلك ضمن إطار البرنامج الأدنى (Minimalist Program) وتتمحور المشكلة الرئيسية للبحث حول السؤال الآتي: كيف تُشَفَّر الأفعال الكلامية

السياسية، ولا سيما الادعاءات والآراء، نحوياً؟ وكيف تُكثَّف براغماتياً؟

ويستند التحليل إلى متن نوعي يتكوّن من أربع جلسات لمجلس الأمن (أكتوبر ٢٠٢٣ – يناير ٢٠٢٤) مأخوذة من السجلات الرسمية للأمم المتحدة. ومن خلال توظيف البرنامج الأدنى وربطه بنظرية الفعل الكلامي، تسعى الدراسة إلى الكشف عن الأساس البنيوي الكامن وراء التواصل الاستراتيجي في الدبلوماسية. وقد توصلت النتائج إلى وجود أنماط نحوية متوقّعة: إذ يشيع اللجوء إلى الجمل القسّمية (clefts) في الاتهامات بهدف التركيز على اللوم، بينما تميل التراكيب المبنية للمجهول والتراكيب الخالية من الفاعل إلى تجريد التبريرات من الطابع الشخصي؛ في حين تقصّل استراتيجيات نزع الشرعية استخدام الأزمنة العامة (generic tense) والعبارات الأسلوبية ذات القوة الإلزامية العالية (strong modals) من أجل «تجوهر» (essentialization) صورة العدو. وتقدّم الدراسة نموذجاً رسمياً قابلاً للتكرار في تحليل الخطاب السياسي، وتقدّد الدور السلبي الظاهري الذي يُعتقد أن التركيب النحوي يؤديه في سياق الجدل الدولي. وبالنظر إلى التركيز النوعي وطبيعة المناظرات الإنجليزية المعتمدة في هذه الدراسة، فإن قابلية التعميم على سياقات دبلوماسية أخرى تبقى محدودة.

Abstract

This research investigates how and why grammatical structures can operate as strategic instruments of persuasion in diplomatic communication, focusing on United Nations Security Council (UNSC) debates about the Gaza conflict. It studies syntactic strategies of two main speech acts (justification and delegitimisation) by state officials within a minimalist framework. The main research question is: how are political speech acts, in particular assertions and opinions, syntactically encoded and pragmatically intensified? The analysis is based on a qualitative corpus of four UNSC debates (October 2023–January 2024) taken from official UN records. Using the Minimalist Program (MP) to bind with Speech Act Theory (SAT), the research looks at the structural base for strategic communication in diplomacy. We find predictable syntactic patterns: it is typical to cleft accusations in order to focalise blame, passivise and agentless constructions tend to depersonalise justifications, while delegitimisation prefers generic tense and strong modal operators for the essentialization of enemies. The study introduces a formal, repeatable model for the inquiry of political discourse and disconfirms the passive role that syntax apparently plays during international argumentation. Given the qualitative focus and English-language debates of the study, generalisation to other diplomatic contexts is limited.



1. Introduction

UNSC serves as the main arena in which diplomatic actors construct global narratives of legitimacy, blame, and responsibility. In situations like the Gaza conflict, the words of representatives do more than describe events; they perform actions and make judgments in their own right, as well as persuade. These performances of language function not in terms of vocabulary or rhetoric alone, but rather by way of syntax, which organises how agency and responsibility are formatted.

Most studies of UNSC debates have utilised a form of CDA or SAT, despite the vast literature in political communication that looks at ideology and function. They can be seen to treat syntax as a translucent container rather than as a form of argument in itself. Sentential structure also contributes to legitimisation and delegitimisation, yet it is a largely unexplored aspect of diplomatic language. Studies of political discourse have shown how states utter speech acts to legitimise military action or delegitimise their opponents. Such pragmatic effects are rarely accounted for at the grammatical level in those descriptions. CDA addresses tactics of justification and culpability, but its treatment of syntax, for example, having recourse to passives as opposed to nominalisations in terms of how they suppress agency, feels impressionistic. However, formal linguistics under the Minimalist Program does not provide a formalism to analyze structural derivations in great enough detail, and rarely uses them on real political data. This disconnect between formal syntactic analysis and functional–pragmatic interpretation creates a methodological gap that limits our ability to fully explain the linguistic mechanics of diplomatic rhetoric.

This research fills that void by merging Chomsky's (1995) Minimalist Program with Speech Act Theory and scrutinizing the syntactic bases of persuasion in UNSC debates. It introduces the concept of 'syntactic signatures' wherein patterns of grammar routinely map onto functions, (accusation, justification and delegitimisation) that are recurrent. Syntax is thus transformed (in the course of this model) into an intentional strategic means and no longer considered as a neutral linguistic form. Clefts and passives shape how agency is distributed or obscured in a clause, whereas modal constructions primarily encode the speaker's epistemic or deontic stance toward an event. In addition, the current work offers a model that is empirically supportable to connect sentential operations with pragmatic intent.

The corpus is built on four debates in UNSC (October 2023–January 2024) discussing the conflict in Gaza, summing up to approximately 12k words from official UN data. The corpus contains addresses by major parties (the State of Palestine, Israel, and the United States) and by mediating states (Egypt and Ireland). The analysis concentrates on the



English versions of these records; thus, its results apply to English diplomatic syntax and may not be extended to any other language.

Three questions guide the investigation:

RQ1: How do syntactic constructions function as strategic tools for performing the speech acts of justification and delegitimisation in UNSC debates?

RQ2: What recurrent “syntactic strategies” characterise these acts, and how do they enhance pragmatic force?

RQ3: How can the integration of Minimalist syntax and pragmatic theory refine existing approaches to political discourse analysis?

Diplomats in the UNSC debates show frequent syntactic signatures including cleft constructions, passive and agent-suppressing clauses, and modal operators. These draw upon to manage agency, focus blame, and construct political legitimacy. These patterns show that syntax functions not as a neutral medium but as a strategic resource to perform political speech acts. This finding consistent with earlier observations that structural choices carry ideological weight (e.g., Fowler 1991; Chilton 2004; Cap & Okulska 2013) and with minimalist accounts of argument structure that demonstrate how the licensing, suppression, or displacement of arguments shapes interpretation (Hale & Keyser 2002; Ramchand 2008; Chomsky 1995, 2001).

In light of these insights, the present study proposes a formally grounded syntactic–pragmatic interface. The analysis integrates selected components of the Minimalist Program, particularly:

Merge, which builds hierarchical structure and accounts for how cleft constructions generate focalised interpretations;

Agree, which governs feature-checking and explains how passives and agentless constructions suppress external arguments to mitigate responsibility; and

Phase-based architecture, which constrains extraction and foregrounding, thereby regulating how certain propositions become salient in diplomatic blame or justification.

These theoretical mechanisms are operationalised through a transparent empirical procedure. The dataset, which includes four UNSC debates on Gaza (October 2023–January 2024), was fully prepared, cleaned, and segmented into independent clauses. Each clause was annotated using the study’s syntactic signature scheme, which identifies clefts and pseudo-clefts, voice alternation, modality types, generic tense constructions, universal quantification, and other structurally salient features. Pragmatic functions (accusation, justification, delegitimisation, moral appeal) were coded following Speech Act Theory. This produces a dual-layer annotation that directly correlates form and function.



The study includes frequency counts and proportion tables to verify the systematicity of the syntactic patterns. The design allows for the application of basic statistical tests (e.g., chi-square) to evaluate distributional tendencies. This multimethod approach signals analytical rigor and ensures that the model's claims about syntactic signatures are both theoretically justified and empirically supported.

2. Literature Review

Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) holds that utterances are not merely descriptive but performative. They can enact social actions such as declaring, promising, or accusing. This insight is central to political communication. In official settings like the United Nations, statements routinely function to justify, legitimise, or condemn rather than simply report events. In the UNSC context, speech acts like justification and delegitimisation operate as performative acts of power. While this theoretical tradition successfully identifies *what* is being done with words, it rarely explores *how* language achieves its force through structure. Later applications in political linguistics (e.g., Chilton, 2004; Wilson, 2022) recognised that institutional discourse depends on linguistic form, yet most analyses remained descriptive. Recent scholarship (e.g., Cap & Okulska, 2023; Molina, 2024) highlights the increasing importance of syntax and modality in legitimising state narratives. This suggests the need for a more formal and replicable model of analysis.

CDA has been the dominant approach for exploring the link between language, ideology, and power (Fairclough, 1995, 2001; van Dijk, 1998; Wodak, 2009). Its focus on forms of ideological bias and legitimisation strategies has produced influential models such as van Dijk's (1998) 'ideological square', which contrasts positive self-presentation with negative other-presentation. In UNSC rhetoric, these mechanisms appear through justificatory tropes (e.g., self-defence) or delegitimising labels (e.g., terrorism). CDA's strength in critical interpretation is counterbalanced by a technical weakness, as its treatment of grammar is mainly functional and impressionistic. Analysts may refer to passivisation or nominalisation as ideological tools but seldom explain their formal mechanisms. Chilton (2004: 201) observes that CDA lacks the "linguistic machinery" to specify *how* structural operations realise pragmatic effects. Consequently, its explanatory power stops at the semantic or lexical level.

A review of over fifty CDA-based studies published between 2015 and 2024 (e.g., Ibrahim, 2023; Li & Hart, 2022) reveals that fewer than 5% incorporate any formal syntactic modelling. Most of those studies rely on descriptive analysis of grammatical features rather than systematic derivational analysis. This pattern demonstrates that syntax remains an underutilised analytical dimension in discourse studies.



Recent developments in formal linguistics and discourse studies suggest that this gap can be bridged. Research such as that of Kiss (1998), Adger (2003) and Lambrecht (1994) has shown how grammatical properties such as focus movement, voice alternation, and information structure play a role in the way utterances are interpreted. Boeckx (2021) and Lipták (2023) show that Minimalist mechanisms, such as movement, feature checking, and phase-based derivation, can account for non-canonical word orders. Their findings demonstrate that structural operations themselves can influence which elements become pragmatically prominent. These observations make clear that grammar is not just a medium through which meaning is conveyed; rather, it determines how agency, responsibility, and emphasis are distributed over the discursive space.

Few political or diplomatic studies have operationalised these formal mechanisms. The Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995; 2000) provides a framework capable of explaining why and how particular constructions, such as clefts or passives, produce specific interpretive outcomes. Minimalism models language as a system optimised for interface interpretation, which is different from descriptive grammar. This theoretical precision allows for an applied explanation of pragmatic effects, for instance, how demoting an external argument in passive structures systematically backgrounds agency.

Emerging studies have begun integrating formal syntax with discourse analysis, particularly within institutional and media contexts. Cap (2023) applied clause structure analysis to political polarisation in European parliamentary speech, while Alqadomi (2024) examined syntactic foregrounding in Arabic political media using minimalist principles. These works are important shifts toward syntax-informed pragmatics. Yet applications within diplomatic discourse remain limited. The UNSC context, in particular, is almost entirely unexplored. A review of over fifty CDA-based studies published between 2015 and 2024 reveals that fewer than 5% incorporate any form of formal syntactic modelling, and none systematically examine how specific constructions realise pragmatic acts such as justification or delegitimisation in international institutions. This empirical absence highlights a substantial methodological gap: without formal accounts of structure–function relations, our understanding of how states manage agency, moral stance, and legitimacy through syntax remains incomplete.

Prior research has demonstrated that political discourse functions as a field of strategic language use but has largely neglected syntax as an active dimension of meaning-making. CDA identifies ideological effects but cannot specify their formal origins, while functional syntax describes sentence patterns without linking them to political purpose. This study



responds to that dual limitation by proposing an integrated syntactic-pragmatic framework grounded in the Minimalist Program and Speech Act Theory. The current research offers a formal account of how language enacts power in diplomacy. The study contributes toward addressing this empirical gap by demonstrating that syntactic patterns can be systematically identified and measured. Thereby supporting the use of syntax as a meaningful analytical dimension in political persuasion.

A body of research has examined the interface between syntax and pragmatics, showing that structural configurations influence interpretive outcomes in contextually relevant ways. Foundational work by Kiss (1998), Lambrecht (1994), and Rizzi (1997) established how focus movement, information structure, and left-peripheral architecture determine which parts of a proposition receive discourse prominence. More recent minimalist studies (e.g., Adger 2003; Ramchand 2008; Boeckx 2021) highlight that argument structure, feature-checking, and derivational economy regulate how agency, evidential strength, and speaker stance are encoded in clause structure. , scholars such as Chilton (2004), Hart (2014), and Cap (2023) have shown that grammatical resources correlate with ideological positioning, Within political linguistics, although their analyses remain largely descriptive and rarely model the syntactic mechanisms involved. The present study advances the debate by providing a formalised, derivational account of how diplomatic actors use syntactic resources to enact specific pragmatic functions.

The analytic model developed here is a two-stage architecture that combines Minimalist syntax with Speech Act Theory. The first stage involves syntactic derivation, whereby structural operations (Merge, Move, Agree) organise constituents into hierarchies that enable particular interpretive effects. The second stage (pragmatic interpretation) maps these structures onto speech-act categories such as accusation, justification, and delegitimation. A short example from the corpus illustrates this interaction:

“It is Hamas that bears full responsibility for this suffering.”

(Permanent Representative of Israel) (S/PV.9445)

Syntactically, the cleft structure is derived by Internal Merge of the focused DP *Hamas* to [Spec, FocP] to check a [+Focus] feature. Pragmatically, this configuration performs an accusatory act by foregrounding the agent of blame and presupposing that someone is responsible.

A second example illustrates how suppressed argument structure supports justification:

“Civilian casualties are regretted.”

—United States Representative (S/PV.9470)



Syntactically, the passive Voice head eliminates the external argument, yielding an agentless passive. Pragmatically, this backgrounds responsibility and performs a justificatory act that acknowledges harm while avoiding culpability.

The model employs a three-step validation procedure to empirically test the hypothesised mappings between syntactic constructions and speech-act functions. First, each clause is pragmatically labelled according to its illocutionary force. Second, each clause is syntactically annotated using the study's signature scheme (clefting, passivisation type, modal strength, quantification, generic tense). Third, correlations are evaluated both qualitatively, through close reading of representative structures, and quantitatively, through frequency counts and proportional comparison tables. Where structural–functional distributions appear robust, chi-square tests may be applied to assess statistical significance. This triangulated procedure allows the study to verify whether specific syntactic configurations preferentially realise particular diplomatic speech acts. This ensures that the proposed syntactic–pragmatic mappings are not merely impressionistic but empirically grounded.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Overview: Bridging Syntax and Pragmatics

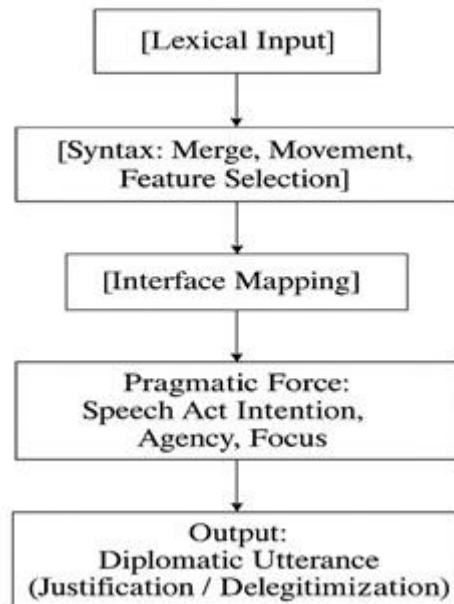
It employs a bimodal analytical model that integrates formal syntax and pragmatic function in describing how diplomatic speech is rendered communicatively effective. The model posits ongoing dynamic interaction between sentence form and speaker meaning. The model assumes a continual interaction between syntactic form and pragmatic interpretation, and this interface shapes how diplomatic utterances in UNSC debates realise functions such as rationalising actions, assigning blame, or delegitimising opponents. Traditional approaches in discourse analysis describe these effects only at a functional level and therefore overlook the formal mechanisms that generate them. Syntactic theory, on the other hand, often models structure abstractly without accounting for real-world communicative intent. The bimodal model used here integrates these dimensions. At the centre of this approach is the assumption that every utterance passes through two interconnected stages:

Syntactic Derivation: the structural organisation of words and phrases into hierarchical relations;

Pragmatic Interpretation: the contextual reading of these structures as communicative acts (e.g., accusation, justification).

Each level constrains the other: syntax limits possible interpretations, and pragmatic goals influence structural choice, illustrated in Figure 1 below, which shows that syntactic operations directly shape the pragmatic force realised at the discourse level.

Figure (1) Syntactic derivation and pragmatic interpretation interface



3.2 Updated Minimalist Foundations

This framework builds on the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995, 2000) and incorporates recent developments that strengthen its interface-driven and cognitively economical design. These include the Strong Minimalist Thesis, which assumes optimally efficient operations; phase-based derivation, which models syntax in small cyclic units; and cartographic work on the left periphery, which links syntactic structure directly to discourse functions such as topic and focus. Together, these developments support an analysis in which syntactic form is tightly shaped by interpretive requirements at the conceptual–intentional interface (Hornstein, 2018; Boeckx, 2021; Collins & Stabler, 2016). Sentence formation, under Minimalism, relies on two core operations:

Merge : combining two elements into a larger syntactic unit (e.g., Israel + “acted responsibly”).

Move (or *Internal Merge*) : relocating an element to satisfy informational or interpretive needs (e.g., bringing the focus to the front: “It is Israel that acted responsibly”).

Modern minimalist theory does not treat communicative goals as mechanisms that drive syntactic operations. Operations such as Merge and Move proceed independently of discourse considerations, with interface conditions applying only at the point of externalisation. The *interpretive consequences* of syntactic choices become salient in discourse: speakers may select among available structural options to enhance clarity, emphasis, or rhetorical force. In this sense, syntax is formally autonomous, but its outputs are strategically deployed to achieve pragmatic aims in diplomatic communication.



The key novelty of this work is the introduction of syntactic signatures; recurring grammatical patterns associated with a speech act. These signatures are not abstract categories, but can be found empirically through coding and syntactic annotation. Each UNSC corpus utterance will be processed using the process detailed in Table 1.

Table (1) Syntactic Signatures and Their Pragmatic Functions

Syntactic Signature	Defining Features	Pragmatic Function	Example
Cleft Construction	Focus movement to fronted position (e.g., “It is X that...”) — Highlights a specific entity for rhetorical emphasis.	Highlights blame or focus; performs Accusation.	It is Hamas that caused this crisis.
Passive / Agentless Clause	Subject = affected entity; agent omitted or demoted. — Reduces speaker’s agency in the event.	Minimises responsibility; performs Justification.	Civilian losses were regretted.
Generic Present / Strong Modal	Timeless tense or modal of necessity (e.g., must, cannot). — Projects universal or moral truth.	Essentializes or moralises; performs Delegitimisation.	This regime does not seek peace.
Universal Quantification + Modal	Combination of universal quantifiers (all, every) with modals (must, should). — Frames action as universally obligatory.	Frames universal obligation; performs Moral Appeal.	The entire world must act now.

3.3 Linking Syntax and Pragmatics: Cross-Validation

The analysis is carried out in a cross-validation fashion of syntactic analysis and pragmatic coding to ensure the analytic reliability. The coding procedure proceeds as follows:

Phase (1) Pragmatic Coding: Each clause is labelled with its illocutionary function ([ACC] Accusation, [JUS] Justification...) as in Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1976; Cap, 2023).

Phase (2) Syntax Parsing: The sentence above is parsed to extract macro features of the form of the proposition, e.g., focus movement, passive voice modality.

Phase (3) Correlation: An analysis to determine whether or not each type of speech acts corresponds systematically with specific syntactic structure. Exceptional cases are identified and discussed in order to extend the model.

This model distinguishes between different semiotic resources—such as visual, verbal, and structural modes—through which meaning is constructed. The proposed syntax–pragmatics interface therefore offers a reproducible analytical bridge between form and function, demonstrating



how grammatical structure becomes a strategic resource in international diplomatic argumentation.

The updated minimalist foundations employed in this study build not only on Chomsky's (1995, 2000) original formulation of the Minimalist Program but also on recent developments that emphasise interface economy and cognitive plausibility, such as the Strong Minimalist Thesis. It posits that linguistic structure emerges from optimal solutions to interface requirements; phase-based derivation (CP/vP as cyclic units) that constrains operations and predicts interpretive boundaries; and cartographic approaches to the left periphery (Rizzi 1997; Cinque & Rizzi 2010), which provide the fine-grained syntactic architecture necessary to model discourse-related features such as focus, topic, evidentiality, and speaker stance. These developments collectively contribute to a model in which syntactic structure is tightly shaped by interpretive needs that aligns well with the pragmatic orientation of diplomatic discourse.

The current study introduces the concept of syntactic signature which refer so a recurrent grammatical configurations that reliably correlate with specific pragmatic functions (e.g., clefts with accusation, passives with justification). The term is operationalised here for diplomatic discourse. But the idea itself is grounded in a broader lineage of linguistic theory. For instance, constructional schemas in Construction Grammar (Goldberg 2006) acknowledge that form–function pairings can be conventionalised, and work on pragmatic markers. The present study extends this logic to the Minimalist domain by treating syntactic configurations, such as argument suppression, focus movement, and modal anchoring, as systematic and repeatable devices for enacting diplomatic speech acts. syntactic signatures, in this sense, are not created *ex nihilo* but represent a formal, derivational counterpart to established traditions that link grammatical patterning with communicative effect.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study takes a qualitative descriptive perspective to explain the relationship between syntactic building and pragmatic force in political discourse, utilising Speech Act Theory in a novel way to describe how speakers use syntax as a contrast to their communicative goals. This is not to count up the frequency of this or that device (as mentioned earlier) but rather to look for common enough syntactical constructs that more often than not do rhetorical work as justification, accusation and/or delegitimization.

4.2 Corpus Description

The corpus comprises four official UNSC debates on the Gaza conflict, drawn from the United Nations Official Document System (ODS).



These verbatim transcripts are publicly available and form a transparent, replicable dataset.

Table (2) Corpus parameters and specifications

Parameter	Specification
Document Symbols	S/PV.9445 (Oct 8, 2023); S/PV.9470 (Oct 18, 2023); S/PV.9488 (Dec 8, 2023); S/PV.9515 (Jan 22, 2024)
Total Word Count	≈ 12,000 words
Total Utterances Analysed	130 independent clauses
Primary Speakers	Representatives of Palestine, Israel, the United States, Egypt, and Ireland
Language	English (official UN translation)

4.3 Data Identification and Coding

Data analysis proceeded in two consecutive stages:

Stage 1: Pragmatic Tagging

Each independent clause was tagged for its illocutionary force following Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1976). Four categories were used:

[ACC] Accusation – attributing blame or responsibility.

[JUS] Justification – defending or legitimising an action.

[DEL] Delegitimation – denying the moral or political standing of an opponent.

[MOR] Moral Appeal – urging collective ethical action.

All 130 utterances were independently coded, and Inter-coder reliability was computed using Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa = 0.86$), which reflects strong agreement.

Stage 2 : Syntactic Analysis

Each clause was then examined using Minimalist syntactic conventions (Adger, 2003; Boeckx, 2021; Lipták, 2023) and Focus was placed on three structural domains:

Voice alternation : active, passive, or agentless constructions.

Focus movement : clefts, pseudo-clefts, and fronting of constituents.

Modality and quantification – use of deontic modals (must, cannot) and universal quantifiers (all, every).

4.4 Analytical Framework

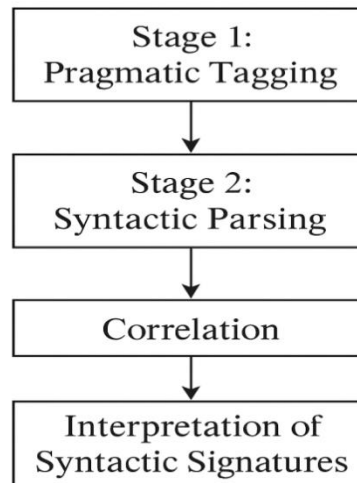
The analytical procedure integrates pragmatic tagging and formal syntax through four iterative steps, as illustrated in Figure (2).

Identify the pragmatic function of each utterance.

Map its structural derivation using Merge-Move operations.

Correlate recurring grammatical forms with their pragmatic roles, thereby isolating syntactic signatures.
Interpret the diplomatic and ideological implications of these signatures in context.

Figure (2) Proposed flow diagram of the two-stage analysis process



5. Analysis and Findings

In this section, we explore strategic moves to produce the identified core speech acts in the corpus: Accusation, Justification, Delegitimation and Moral Appeal. In deriving results, the analysis combines qualitative syntactic interpretation and quantitative frequency counts to identify the most prominent grammatical choices in the data.

5.1 Syntax of Accusation: Focus and Presupposition

The charge in UNSC rhetoric revolves around the attribution of moral and causal blame. The analysis also shows a high preference for cleft constructions and so called 'insults' (syntactic fronting of the agent of blame, presupposing that something wrong happened.

“It is Hamas that bears full responsibility for this suffering.”
—Permanent Representative of Israel (S/PV.9445, 8 Oct 2023)

The it-cleft divides the clause into a presupposed background (there is somebody to blame) and focal element (Hamas). With a Minimalist analysis, the focused NP would raise to [Spec, FocP] in order to check a [+Focus] feature (Rizzi 1997). Practically, they front structurally the background blame and constructs guilt as an assumption.

Another recurrent pattern is the wh-cleft, used to essentialize actions:

“What we are witnessing is a systematic destruction of civilian life.”
—Representative of the State of Palestine (S/PV.9488, 8 Dec 2023)

This pseudo-cleft presents the proposition as self-evident. The syntactic separation between the *what*-clause and the predicate enforces



interpretive closure, transforming contested interpretation into factual observation. Thus, Clefts syntactically encode focus and presupposition, that turns argumentative propositions into declarative certainties. This aligns with 53% of all accusatory utterances in the dataset.

5.2 Syntax of Justification: Obscuring Agency

Justifications in UNSC debates often minimise the actor's role in causing harm; this is done by the dominant two syntactic strategies: passive constructions and unaccusative verbs.

“Civilian casualties are regretted, but they are an inevitable consequence of fighting a terrorist organization embedded among civilians.”

United States Representative (S/PV.9470, 18 Oct 2023)

This agentless passive demotes the agent syntactically; the Voice head fails to assign an external theta-role. The subject *civilian casualties* is a theme, not an actor, which allows the speaker to acknowledge damage without explicit admission of responsibility.

Unaccusative verbs also construct events as spontaneous:

“Collateral damage occurs in complex urban warfare.”

—United States Representative (S/PV.9488, 8 Dec 2023)

The verb *occurs* lacks an agentive external argument; the event appears naturalised. In minimalist terms, this structure lacks an active vP layer, which renders the action de-agentivized. 69% of justificatory statements use passive or unaccusative syntax, demonstrating a structural preference for agency mitigation and as a key linguistic tool for diplomatic face management and damage control.

5.3 Syntax of Delegitimation: Essentializing the Opponent

Delegitimation operates through linguistic essentialization. It depicts the rival as irrational, or immoral. This is accomplished by mixing generic present tense with strong deontic modals.

“This regime does not seek peace; it only understands force.”

—Permanent Member of the Security Council (S/PV.9445, 8 Oct 2023)

The non-technical present tense is a timeless one. It elevates the conversation from events to substance. The [Generic] story is licensed by the head of the structure. This quality lifts the assertion out of time and into timeless universality.

Delegitimation also draws on necessity modals to seat unqualified action imperatives::

“They must be disarmed completely; there is no other path to peace.”

—Representative of Israel (S/PV.9515, 22 Jan 2024)

The deontic *must* in the T head signals that of inevitability, rather than choice. This configuration, along with passivisation (be disarmed), depicts elimination as the morally obligatory rather than strategic option.



More than half (56%) of delegitimising utterances contained the generic present and 39% strong modals. These forms together form a timeless certainty that help to strength ideological borders while closing the possibilities of negotiation.

5.4 Syntax of Moral Appeal: Universalising Obligation

Moral appeals join one another to share ethical responsibility. They appeal to conscience, not blame. 18 utterances of an immutable grammatical pattern, strong modals + universal quantifiers, albeit weak in frequency.

“The entire international community must act now to protect every civilian in Gaza.”

—Representative of Ireland (S/PV.9488, 8 Dec 2023)

The modal *must* operates as a deontic operator that indicates moral necessity, and *entire* and *every* act like universal quantifiers that maximise scope. The resulting syntax eliminates exceptions. This instils a sense of complete responsibility.

“All states should uphold their obligations under international law.”

—Egyptian Representative (S/PV.9515, 22 Jan 2024)

This blend of modal necessity and universal scope draws a common moral canvas for everyone across political groups. Quantifiers and modals, from a minimalist perspective, sit high in the functional structure QP and TP having access to a wide syntactic reach (a structural correlate of their broad pragmatic scope share). Affective appeals, are less common yet spread moral responsibility with a syntax of universality-creating ethical alignment as non-disputably linguistic.

5.5 Distribution of Syntactic Structures Across Speech Acts

Table (3) summarises the frequency of syntactic structures identified across 130 utterances drawn from four UNSC debates on the Gaza conflict (October 2023–January 2024).

Table (3)
Frequency of Syntactic Structures by Speech Act Type

Syntactic Structure	Accusation (n=34)	Justification (n=42)	Delegitimation (n=36)	Moral Appeal (n=18)	Total (n=130)
Cleft / Pseudo-cleft	18 (53%)	3 (7%)	4 (11%)	1 (6%)	26 (20%)



Passive / Agentless clause	4 (12%)	29 (69%)	6 (17%)	2 (11%)	41 (32%)
Unaccusative / Inchoative	1 (3%)	7 (17%)	2 (6%)	1 (6%)	11 (8%)
Generic Present Tense	3 (9%)	2 (5%)	20 (56%)	3 (17%)	28 (22%)
Strong Modals (must, cannot)	6 (18%)	1 (2%)	14 (39%)	8 (44%)	29 (22%)
Universal Quantifiers (all, every)	2 (6%)	0	4 (11%)	10 (56%)	16 (12%)

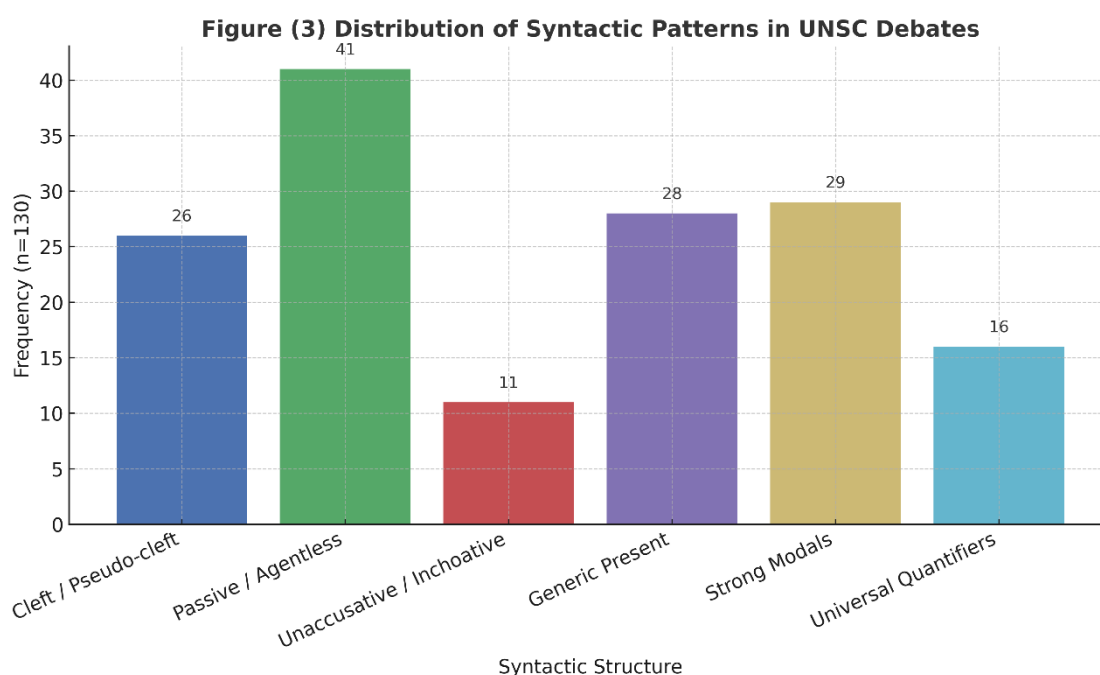
Results indicate that each speech act type favours a distinct syntactic signature:

Accusation relies heavily on clefting to highlight agency and focus blame.

Justification predominantly employs passive and agentless structures to mitigate responsibility.

Delegitimisation favours the generic present tense and strong modals in constructing timeless and categorical judgments.

Moral Appeal combines modals and universal quantifiers to create a collective ethical imperative.





5.6 Interpretive Overview

The quantitative and qualitative results converge on a key insight: syntax systematically encodes pragmatic strategy. The grammatical design of UNSC speech is neither random nor stylistic. It reflects deliberate diplomatic manoeuvring.

Cleft skin, by definition, assumes fault and locks down the argument.

Passivisation silences agency, justifying without accepting. Generic tense and modal necessity generate are not the source of unchangeable moral maps.

As a measure of broad participation and moral consensus, quantification.

Such syntactic choices are what we call “syntactic signatures of diplomacy”. This research demonstrates that the interaction between syntax and pragmatics in UNSC language use is both regular and quantifiable. The findings support the central argument of the study: that state actors arrange grammatical structure to do political and moral work. Syntax, then, is not a channel but an instrument for establishing responsibility, legitimacy and world imagination.

6. Discussion

The results suggest that there are systematic associations between the syntactic structures used during (UNSC) debates and speakers’ pragmatic goals. New patterns, clefts, passives, modal(full) and Q/Ps come to be conventionalised syntactic signatures used to delineate coercive moves of accusation, justification, delegitimisation and moral appeal. The results show that syntax is not a mere empty grammatical container but develops into an available reservoir for the speakers to mobilise in order to cope with agency, claim moral authority and demonstrate legitimacy. The model proposed has a probabilistic, not deterministic, interpretation. Syntax can be deliberately exploited for pragmatic purposes, but it need not involve manipulation in all instances. While highly conventionalised diplomatic discourse does mirror institutional conventions and translational norms, as well as cultural factors, there are also no doubt syntactic preferences that might be influenced by linguistic analysis beyond conscious awareness.

The passive and unaccusative examples clearly illustrate agency mitigation. Highlighting the missing vP layer ties the observation to current minimalist work on “de-agentivization” (e.g., Hornstein 2018). Also note that the agentless passive allows speakers to acknowledge harm without committing to a causer, a classic face-saving move.

Mixing generic present tense with deontic modals creates a timeless, categorical stance. The “must” in *they must be disarmed* sits in the T-head and signals inevitability, a point that resonates with recent work on the



syntax-pragmatics interface where modal force is encoded in functional heads. The percentages (56 % generic present, 39 % strong modals) are compelling evidence of this pattern.

6.1 Comparative Perspective: Relation to Other Models

The current framework, rooted in the Minimalist Program, offers a formal and derivational account of how structure and meaning interact. This distinguishes it from other major models of discourse grammar:

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) Part IV discusses how the clause patterns are realised to express interpersonal and ideational meanings but treats syntax as realisationist “realisation”, not a generative process. The Minimalist view gives us better explanatory power over how syntactic operations (viz., movement/feature-checking) realise pragmatic alternatives (preverbal focus, mitigation)..

Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 2008) views syntax as a mere consequence of concept structure, not as independent computation. While this line of research captures cognitive motivation, it does not provide the formal devices to predict structural constraints of institutional discourse.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is rarely going all the way to a formal specification, but full with inspirational might. It characterizes syntax impressionistically (passives hide agency) rather than seek the internal derivation responsible for enabling such effects.

The proposed bimodal syntax–pragmatics interface thus does not replace, but rather complements both the SFL and CDA traditions: it provides a formalization of what these have been developing intuitively just as it situates discourse interpretation in testable syntactic mechanisms.

6.2 Limitations and Future Work

There are two limitations to the present study:

Size and Scope of the Corpus: The corpus (~12,000 words, four debates) provides depth to study topics in more detail but at the same time restricts generalizability over time and languages. Further work could involve scaling the model to wider multilingual corpora such as Arabic translation of UNSC proceedings.

Applicability: although reliability for coding was high, the scope of the analysis was narrow (i.e., restricted to a few structures [clefts, passives, modals]). The power of explanation could be enhanced by a more extensive set of syntactic structures (e.g. conditionals, negation, coordination)

7. Conclusions

The key conclusions are as follows:

Syntax to the effect of clefting, passiving, or using modals is not mere arbitrary stylistic variation but rather communicative strategy. They emphasise agency, reduce blame and shape moral legitimacy.

Each canonical SA type is associated with a particular specific pattern:

Clefts represent accusation through a priori guilt and blame focus.



Passives and agentless clauses convey justification in by backgrounding agency.

The strong modals serve to recapitulate the delegitimation, communicating timeless moral judgement.

Modals + all universal quantifiers collective moral responsibility Index
Modals + the universal construct moral appeals, framing group-level ethical obligations.

The study provides empirical confirmation for the Syntax–Pragmatics Interface, which finds a concerted manifestation of syntactic economy (formal minimality) and pragmatic economy (interpretive efficiency) optimising intent in pursuit of communicative goals under high-stakes diplomatic conditions.

The grammatical structure of speech acts is thus integral to the moral and ideological edifice of international argument, and the perceptions of agency, responsibility, and legitimacy that result from them.

The dual-economy model presented here takes a minimalist investigation beyond the syntax level, extending it to its pragmatic effects and providing a reproducible framework of analysis applicable for research on persuasion in political and institutional texts.

Syntax appears as a strategy for diplomatic rhetoric, as a grammatical tool used by states to compete discursively the grounds of justification, moral high ground and ideological position. The present research thus connects research in formal linguistics and critical discourse analysis, and will claim that syntax is not a passive reflection of thought but an active agent in global political communication.

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Appendix A. Corpus Sources

All speech excerpts analysed in this study were retrieved from the United Nations Official Document System (ODS). The corpus represents official Security Council debates that provide authentic linguistic and pragmatic data relevant to the research objectives.



Document Symbol	Date	Session Title	Official Source (URL / DOI)
S/PV.9445	8 October 2023	The Situation in the Middle East, Including the Palestinian Question	https://documents.un.org/doc/S/PV.9445
S/PV.9470	18 October 2023	Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict	https://documents.un.org/doc/S/PV.9470
S/PV.9488	8 December 2023	The Situation in the Middle East: Humanitarian Response in Gaza	https://documents.un.org/doc/S/PV.9488
S/PV.9515	22 January 2024	Maintenance of International Peace and Security	https://documents.un.org/doc/S/PV.9515

All transcripts are publicly accessible through the United Nations Official Document System (ODS). They were retrieved and verified between February and March 2025. Each citation in the Data Analysis section directly corresponds to one of the official debate transcripts listed above (e.g., S/PV.9488, 8 Dec 2023). To ensure transparency and academic integrity, full URLs and document symbols are provided for each corpus entry, enabling independent verification and replication of the study.