

A Political Discourse Analysis of the 2025 Trump-Zelenskyy Meeting

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Abstract

Diplomatic meetings are unique settings in which power, identity, and political legitimacy are negotiated through language. This study examines the use of language by US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during their highly publicized Oval Office meeting on 28 February 2025, and it uses Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to analyze a verbatim transcript of the public part of the meeting (10 minutes and 37 seconds) to systematically identify and analyze five types of discursive strategies: referential/nomination strategies, predication strategies, argumentation strategies, perspectivation strategies, and intensification/mitigation strategies. The findings show that there were 273 instances of the five discursive strategies, with 197 (72.1%) instances being used by Trump and 76 (27.9%) instances being used by Zelenskyy, and the difference in the number of instances used by Trump and Zelenskyy can be attributed to the fact that Trump spoke significantly more than Zelenskyy. The study also found that intensification and mitigation were the most commonly used strategies by Trump and Zelenskyy, and were used by both leaders as a shared tool for managing the diplomatic tone in the meeting, however, the study also found that there were significant differences in the way in which Trump and Zelenskyy used the discursive strategies. Trump used predication strategies much more frequently (38.6%), and used them to present himself as a uniquely strong and decisive leader, whereas Zelenskyy used argumentation strategies with a significantly higher frequency (19.7%), and used them to legitimize Ukraine's geopolitical position by drawing on historical events, cause-and-effect reasoning, and personal experience. The results support both hypotheses and contribute to the expanding body of research that applies DHA to contemporary diplomatic communication, and they also show how unequal power relations are not only reflected in language but are also actively reinforced through linguistic strategies.

Keywords: *Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA); Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); political discourse; discursive strategies; diplomatic communication; Trump; Zelenskyy.*

تحليل خطابي نقدي لاجتماع ترامب-زيلنسكي في عام 2025

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المستخلص

تُعدّ اللقاءات الدبلوماسية بيئاتٍ فريدةً تُفَارِضُ فيها العلاقات المتعلقة بالسلطة والهوية والشرعية السياسية عبر الخطاب اللغوي. تتناول هذه الدراسة توظيف اللغة من قِبَل الرئيس الأمريكي دونالد ترامب ونظيره الأوكراني فولوديمير زيلينسكي خلال لقائهما المثير للاهتمام الواسع في المكتب البيضاوي بتاريخ الثامن والعشرين من فبراير 2025، إذ تستند إلى مقارنة روث فوداك التاريخية-الخطابية (DHA) أداة تحليلية لفحص نصّ حرفيّ مُفْرَغ من الجزء العلني للقاء، البالغة مدته عشر دقائق وسبعاً وثلاثين ثانية، وذلك بهدف الرصد المنهجي وتحليل خمسة أنواع من الاستراتيجيات الخطابية، هي: الاستراتيجيات الإحالية/التسمية، واستراتيجيات الإسناد والوصف، واستراتيجيات التبرير والحجاج، واستراتيجيات التأطير المنظوري، واستراتيجيات التكتيف والتخفيف. وقد كشفت النتائج عن تسجيل ما مجموعه 273 توظيفاً لهذه الاستراتيجيات الخمس، إذ استحوذ ترامب على 197 توظيفاً بنسبة 72.1%، في حين بلغت حصة زيلينسكي 76 توظيفاً بنسبة 27.9%، ويُعزى هذا التفاوت في حجم التوظيف إلى أن ترامب استأثر بحصة خطابية أكبر بكثير مقارنةً بزيلينسكي. كذلك أظهرت الدراسة أن استراتيجيات التكتيف والتخفيف كانت الأكثر شيوعاً لدى كلا الزعيمين، إذ وُظِّفَتْ كلُّ منهما أداةً مشتركة لإدارة النبذة الدبلوماسية في اللقاء؛ غير أن الدراسة كشفت في الوقت ذاته عن فوارق جوهرية في أسلوب توظيف كلٍّ منهما لهذه الاستراتيجيات الخطابية. فقد لجأ ترامب إلى استراتيجيات الإسناد والوصف بوتيرة أعلى بكثير بلغت 38.6%، موظفاً إياها لتقديم نفسه زعيماً استثنائي القوة وقاطع العزم، في المقابل أفاد زيلينسكي من استراتيجيات الحجاج والتبرير بتكرار أعلى ملحوظ بلغ 19.7%، مستعيناً بها لتشريع الموقف الجيوسياسي لأوكرانيا من خلال الاستناد إلى الأحداث التاريخية ومنطق السببية والتجربة الشخصية. تدعم هذه النتائج الفرضيتين المطروحتين كليهما، وتُسهِم في إثراء المنظومة البحثية المتنامية التي تُطَبِّق مقارنة فوداك التاريخية-الخطابية على الخطاب الدبلوماسي المعاصر، كما تُجَلِّي الكيفية التي لا تنعكس فيها علاقات القوة غير المتكافئة في اللغة وحسب، بل تتجدر وتتعرّز بصورة فاعلة من خلال الاستراتيجيات اللغوية ذاتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: منهج تحليل الخطاب النقدي، منهج تحليل الخطاب التاريخي، الخطاب السياسي، الاستراتيجيات الخطابية، اللقاء الدبلوماسي، ترامب، زيلينسكي

1. Introduction

Diplomatic language is never what it says. When political leaders speak on the global stage, their words do far more than communicate information because they project power, signal priorities, and perform carefully constructed political identities. They project power, signal priorities, and perform carefully constructed political identities, and thus demonstrate what Fairclough (1992) terms "discursive power": the power to construct reality, the players, and the policies to promote or challenge through linguistic choices. The Oval Office meeting on 28 February 2025 between U.S. President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy provides an example, which garnered intense global attention not only because of the potential implications of the meeting, such as the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, the prospect of a ceasefire, and the future of U.S. military and financial aid to Ukraine, but also because of the confrontational and at times overtly aggressive tone of the exchange between the two leaders. Trump, who



publicly called Zelenskyy "disrespectful," while Zelenskyy repeatedly tried to turn the conversation back to Ukraine's existential crisis, and the long history behind it, was a backdrop for a meeting that was a remarkable example of political language in action: a moment of actual geopolitical consequence, unfolding under the glare of the global media spotlight, in which language was the main tool, and also one of the main points of contention, and it is a particularly striking example of diplomatic language in action.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

The present study is driven by the following research questions:

1. *What are the predominant discursive strategies employed by each president, and how do they differ in both frequency and functional application?*
2. *How do Presidents Trump and Zelenskyy deploy intensification and mitigation strategies to manage the interactional tone of the meeting and navigate points of convergence and conflict?*
3. *In what ways do the identified discursive strategies serve to construct, reinforce, and legitimize the respective political identities and policy objectives of the two leaders?*

Along these lines, the present study formulates two hypotheses: first, it is expected that both presidents will use intensification and mitigation as the primary discursive strategies to neutralize divergences and emphasize agreements, and, in so doing, to preserve the facade of diplomatic politeness; second, their secondary strategic preferences are expected to differ in line with their structural roles, because, as the leader of the most powerful superpower, Trump is expected to prefer predication strategies which construct the image of a strong, transactional leader, while, as the representative of a dependent nation, Zelenskyy is expected to use argumentation strategies to legitimate Ukraine's demands through historically motivated, causal, and moralized narratives.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Political Discourse Analysis: Theoretical Foundations

Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) is an interdisciplinary field that combines pragmatics, sociolinguistics, rhetoric, political science, and social psychology to investigate the intricate relationship between language, power and ideology in political communication (van Dijk, 1997; Wilson, 2015), and PDA and its critical offspring, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), differ from more neutral types of discourse analysis in that they explicitly aim to lay bare how seemingly harmless linguistic choices are, in fact, socially and ideologically loaded, and how they do not merely reflect but also construct, maintain, and change social reality (Fairclough, 1992). The present study draws on three theoretical traditions,

including Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model, which posits that discourse can be seen as text, discursive practice, and social practice at the same time, and underlines the dialectical relationship between language and the social structure in which it is embedded. Van Dijk (1998) expands Fairclough's model by adding a cognitive dimension, according to which ideologies operate as the fundamental mental frameworks through which social groups organize shared beliefs, and political discourse is a central medium for the activation, reproduction, and challenge of these ideologies in communication. Furthermore, extending the above theories, Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) emphasizes the need for an adequate historical and intertextual analysis, because each case of political communication should not only be understood in relation to its immediate interactional context, but also with regard to the larger historical narratives, institutional norms, and ideological traditions it invokes, reinforces, or transforms (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016).

3.2 The Discourse-Historical Approach: Operational Framework

The DHA, initially outlined in detail by Wodak and Meyer (2001) and later expanded by Reisigl and Wodak (2016), approaches political communication in terms of a systematic configuration of five discursive strategies, and the strategies are collectively referred to as the analytical framework that is used in this study to examine how language constructs social actors, ascribes properties to them, legitimates or delegitimates claims, forms particular opinions and intensifies or attenuates rhetorical effect. Table 3 below outlines this theoretical model, showing the five strategies and how each is predominantly realised in the case of the present study.

Table 3. Conceptual Framework: DHA Discursive Strategies and Their Realization in the Trump-Zelenskyy Meeting

DHA Strategy	Core Function	Primary Realization in this Study
Referential/Nomination	Constructs and categorizes social actors, events, and phenomena through linguistic choices	Metaphors, metonymies, and membership categorization devices (e.g., in-group/out-group labeling, self-nomination as indispensable mediator)
Predication	Attributes positive or negative qualities, traits, and characteristics to	Evaluative adjectives, hyperbole, implicit stereotyping (e.g., Trump self-predicating toughness;

	nominated actors	Zelenskyy predicating Putin as lawless)
Argumentation	Justifies or delegitimizes political decisions via topoi (argumentative schemes)	Topoi of history, cause-effect, consequence, and experiential authority (e.g., historical presidency lists; experiential legitimacy challenges)
Perspectivation	Positions speakers and referents within a moral/political frame	Modal verbs, reported speech, spatial and hierarchical framing (e.g., self-universalization; denial of interlocutor's right to speak)
Intensification/Mitigation	Modulates the epistemic and affective force of utterances	Intensifiers (tremendous, damn, God bless), hedges (happens to be, I think), repetition, understatement, and diplomatic softening

Note. Adapted from Wodak and Meyer (2001) and Reisigl and Wodak (2016).

The referential or nomination strategy refers to the ways in which social actors, events and phenomena are linguistically constructed and categorized through naming, metaphors, and membership categorization (Wodak 2015), and, as Wodak (2015: 45) states, "the linguistic means of nomination are never neutral; they are always ideologically loaded." The predication strategy attributes positive or negative traits, characteristics and features to the thus named actors through evaluative adjectives, verbs and both implicit and explicit predicates, and nomination and predication together form the basic discursive mechanisms by which the "self" and "other" are constructed in political communication. The argumentation strategy is concerned with the logical and rhetorical patterns with which political actors justify their own positions and delegitimize those of their opponents, and within the DHA, special emphasis is placed on the analysis of topoi - argumentative schemes, which are defined as "content-related rules or conclusion-licenses that connect the argument with the conclusion" (Reisigl & Wodak 2016: 28), such as the topoi of history, threat and consequence. Perspectivation involves how speakers position themselves and others within evaluative and moral frames



through reporting verbs, modal expressions, and pronoun choice, while intensification and mitigation constitute the modulation of the epistemic and affective force of utterances: intensifiers amplify the rhetorical impact of a statement, while mitigating devices dilute it, often with the purpose of diplomatic face-management and strategic ambiguity (Petrova 2022).

3.3 DHA in Contemporary Political and Diplomatic Discourse Research

More recent research has demonstrated that the DHA can be productively applied to different types of political communication, for instance, Jovanović (2020) uses the model to examine Serbian political discourse on the legacy of the Yugoslav Wars. His findings indicate that mitigation fulfills an important role in Serbian political discourse because it allows political actors to acknowledge collective suffering while at the same time dodging direct blame attribution, and in doing so, mitigation helps maintain a national narrative that denies full historical responsibility. Al-Fahad (2021) also applies the DHA to official discourse on the Qatar diplomatic crisis, arguing that the topos of history was used by both sides to construct carefully selected historical narratives that present their current stance as a matter of principle against a long history of the other side's alleged wrongdoing.

Chen (2022) used the DHA to contrast the COVID-19 official discourse of the US and China, and the nomination strategy, specifically the contrast between "Chinese virus" and "global pandemic", has been a first move of the entire geopolitical response. Petrova (2022) used the DHA to analyse the pandemic speeches of the Eastern European leaders and argues that the observed pattern of strategic oscillation between intensification and mitigation should be seen as an attempt to find a balance between intensifying the sense of danger enough to ensure public compliance and mitigating the same to prevent the panic from turning into a widespread social and economic one. In the area of climate diplomacy, O'Connell and Garcia (2023) found that the argumentation at the COP26 and COP27 summits was dominated by the topos of intergenerational justice, constructing climate inaction as a serious moral failure towards future generations and not just a policy failure.

In the domain of identity politics and populist discourse, Müller and Schmidt (2021) analyzed the Alternative for Germany party's deployment of referential and predication strategies to construct a dichotomy between an idealized 'pure people' and a malevolent 'globalist elite', while Rossi (2024) demonstrated the synergistic power of combining nomination, predication, and the topos of threat in the construction of anti-immigration discourse during the 2024 Italian election campaign. Khan and Lee (2024) extended DHA to digital discourse, showing how perspectivation through selective quotation and visual framing constitutes the primary discursive mechanism in social media political campaigns. Most recently,

Nkrumah (2025) has applied the framework to academic policy discourse, demonstrating that the struggle over curriculum decolonization is fundamentally a discursive struggle over the nomination and predication of 'valid knowledge' itself. Notwithstanding the breadth and depth of this body of scholarship, there remains a relative lacuna in the application of DHA to contemporaneous high-stakes bilateral diplomatic exchanges—particularly those characterized by explicit asymmetries of power and existential stakes of the kind exemplified by the Trump-Zelenskyy meeting. The present study seeks to address this gap.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data Collection and Corpus Description

The corpus for this study consists of the verbatim transcript of the public segment of the meeting between Presidents Trump and Zelenskyy, held in the Oval Office of the White House on 28 February 2025. The video recording was retrieved from the official White House website and transcribed verbatim by the researchers, yielding a transcript corresponding to a total interaction time of 10 minutes and 37 seconds. The corpus consists of all utterances produced by both leaders during the public part of the meeting, including those that were directed at the journalists present, and only utterances that could be heard clearly and could be attributed reliably to a particular speaker are included in the analysis. Utterances that were inaudible are marked as such and excluded from the coding, because the descriptive statistics of the corpus are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Corpus Description and Data Parameters

Data Source	Meeting Type	Date & Venue	Duration
Official White House video & verbatim transcript	High-level bilateral diplomatic summit	28 February 2025, Oval Office, Washington D.C.	10 minutes 37 seconds (public segment)
Analytical framework	Unit of analysis	Total coded utterances	Coding approach
Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak & Meyer, 2001)	Individual speaker-turn utterances and propositional clauses	273 discursive strategy instances	Inductive qualitative coding + frequency quantification

Note. The meeting took place in the Oval Office, Washington D.C. Only the public segment, broadcast and officially released, was analyzed.

4.2 Analytical Framework and Procedure

The analysis in this paper relies on the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by Wodak and Meyer (2001) and later revised by Reisigl and Wodak (2016), and the DHA was chosen as the primary theoretical framework for this analysis for three reasons. Firstly, the systematic set of five discursive strategies that it provides represents a rich and practical set of tools for exploring the complexities of diplomatic language, and secondly, the approach's emphasis on historical and intertextual context makes it particularly well-suited for an interaction in which references to past events, previous agreements and established geopolitical narratives play such a central role. Finally, as a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis, the DHA is explicitly concerned with how language is used to construct, maintain and sometimes subvert relations of power--an issue that lies at the very heart of the Trump-Zelenskyy meeting. The analysis was conducted in three stages: in the first stage, the full transcript was read through in order to gain an impression of the communicative dynamics, the main themes and the interactional trajectory of the encounter, and in the second stage, each individual utterance in the transcript was systematically coded according to the five DHA discursive strategies. Coding was carried out inductively, and it was allowed for that several strategies could co-occur in the same utterance, and in a third stage, the frequency of each strategy was quantified for each speaker, and a qualitative analysis of a selection of examples was conducted to demonstrate how the strategies are implemented in practice, and more specifically how they contribute to the construction of political identity, legitimacy and power. The frequency counts reported below should not be seen as supporting any claim to statistical representativeness, but rather they are used to give a general quantitative overview, and the analysis is generally qualitative and interpretive, and the quantitative data mainly serve to support and contextualise the qualitative interpretations.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative Overview

A total of 273 discursive strategy instances were identified across the transcript. Trump accounted for 197 instances (72.1%) and Zelenskyy for 76 (27.9%). This marked disparity is attributable primarily to Trump's significantly greater speaking time during the interaction, rather than to a more strategically intensive deployment of discursive resources per unit of speech. Table 2 presents the full frequency distribution of strategies by speaker.

Table 2. Frequency and Proportional Distribution of DHA Discursive Strategies by Speaker

Discursive Strategy	Trump (n)	Trump (%)	Zelenskyy (n)	Zelenskyy (%)
Referential/Nomination	22	11.2%	11	14.5%
Predication	76	38.6%	22	28.9%
Argumentation	13	6.6%	15	19.7%
Perspectivation	14	7.1%	6	7.9%
Intensification/Mitigation	72	36.5%	22	28.9%
TOTAL	197	100%	76	100%

Note. Percentages are calculated as a proportion of each speaker's total coded strategy instances. Rounding accounts for minor deviations from 100%.

The top two strategies used by both speakers were intensification and mitigation, with intensification being the most frequently used overall (36.5% of Trump's coded instances and 28.9% of Zelenskyy's), but the second most frequently used strategies for both speakers were diametrically opposite: predication was Trump's second most used strategy (38.6%), while argumentation was Zelenskyy's second most used strategy (19.7%). These overall results support both hypotheses, and provide the quantitative basis for the qualitative analysis presented in the following subsections.

5.2 Referential and Nomination Strategies

5.2.1 Trump

Trump's deployment of the referential/nomination strategy was characterized by a consistent pattern of self-nomination as the indispensable agent of any diplomatic resolution. The exemplar:

'Well, if I didn't align myself with both of them, you'd never have a deal.'

This remark displays the pattern most clearly, and the conditional is not a weak counterfactual, but a rhetorical assertion of personal importance: the deal is framed as causally contingent on Trump's particular presence and position, as opposed to institutional routines or multilateral agreements. The nomination of "I" as the sole

sufficient condition for any deal is a kind of myth of indispensability: a discourse act that transfers agency and power to the speaker, and designates him as the only possible source of diplomatic effectiveness, which is amplified by the companion remark:

'I'm not close to anybody. I'm close to the United States of America.'

Trump nominates himself for the first time, re-nominating his own political position, but in terms of political allegiance, to an allegiance exclusively national, and by re-nominating "the United States of America" as the sole object of his allegiance, he pre-emptively neutralises any accusations of partisanship while enacting a discursive collapsing of his personal authority with the collective identity and authority of the nation. This collapsing is a systematic feature of Trump's political discourse, as other research has demonstrated (Müller & Schmidt, 2021; Chen, 2022), and the most escalatory example of nomination is found in the utterance.

'You're gambling with the lives of millions of people, you're gambling with World War III.'

By naming the present path of the conflict "World War III", Trump appropriates one of the most fear-charged referents in the historical memory of the Western world, and this appellation is not neutral, nor descriptive, but a performative act of nomination. By ascribing this label to the present situation, he recasts what would otherwise be a policy dispute into an existential fork-in-the-road, thereby transforming his position from one of many to the only bulwark against global catastrophe, since in doing so, he tacitly positions his own position as the only alternative to a catastrophic future.

5.2.2 Zelenskyy

Zelenskyy's nomination strategies were comparatively more subtle and relationally oriented. The utterance:

'We signed with him—me, like a new president in 2019, I signed with him the deal.'

It helps Trump look like an established statesman and it benefits Trump. It corroborates his actual prior encounter with Zelenskyy because it makes him appear as a global statesman who has had previous bilateral meetings. He doesn't come across as someone seeking a favor, thus "Him me like" might even be beneficial to his defense. It makes him appear more authentic and truthful, therefore it helps his overall image. Zelenskyy's most effective application of nomination is this:

'During the war everybody has problems—even you—but you have a nice ocean.'

This is only true on the sentence level, and on the level of discourse this is a comparison. It places both leaders' countries at the same level, because this comparison is being made to highlight their differences. Trump has "problems" because he is wealthy and secure, thus this security is being contrasted with the problems he is facing. This contrasts with Ukraine's struggle for survival, so the two countries are being presented as having different challenges. The "nice ocean" serves as a metaphor for security and protection, therefore it is being used to convey a sense of safety. This shifts the moral framework of the conversation, and as a result, the focus of the conversation is being altered.

5.3 Predication Strategies

5.3.1 Trump

Predication constituted Trump's second most frequently deployed strategy, and its functional orientation was overwhelmingly self-directed: Trump consistently attributed to himself qualities of unmatched toughness, decisive authority, and unique diplomatic capacity. The utterance:

'You want me to be tough? I could be tougher than any human being you've ever seen.'

This quote exemplifies the pattern in its most blatant form, and the exaggerated statement that he is "tougher than any human being you've ever seen" is not a factual, literal claim, but a performative one: in other words, he is saying, in effect, that his toughness is absolutely superior, beyond question. This is a maximal formulation that, by definition, cannot really be tested or compared, because if Trump's toughness is greater than any person you could possibly imagine, then other politicians cannot even be measured on the same scale. The way he describes the adversarial processes themselves becomes especially significant in this light, therefore, the predication evacuates the discursive field of any alternative standard.

'It was a Democrat scam and he had to go through that.'

Here Trump predicates the process as a "scam" and the in-group actor as a victim who "had to go through that," because "scam" is more than a signal of unfairness, it frames the process as a total and obvious fraud and illegitimacy, and thus forestalls other ways of framing it in advance. This is a negative predication of the process paired with a victim-turned-hero predication of the in-group, one of the most powerful and common patterns in exclusionary political discourse, according to Reisigl and Wodak (2016).

5.3.2 Zelenskyy

Zelenskyy's predication strategies were notably more other-directed and more varied in their evaluative valence, encompassing both strongly negative predication of Putin and strategically calibrated predication of Trump. The utterance:

'He killed our people and he didn't exchange prisoners.'

This sentence indicts Putin on two counts, and one: he killed people. Two: he violated the rule that both sides must exchange prisoners, because these are serious offenses. Taken together, these indictments suggest that Putin isn't just an enemy who fights dirty, therefore he's a murderer. He's a murderer who doesn't play by the rules of war, thus he's a dangerous leader. This sentence is far less condemnatory when it comes to Trump, and this sentence:

'He happens to be right about, from the very beginning of the war.'

In this context, Zelenskyy's statement is a carefully crafted, deliberate concession, and the hedge "happens to be" softens the assertion that Trump is "right," making it a reluctant, conditional admission rather than an unqualified, ringing endorsement. At the same time, the phrase "from the very beginning of the war" broadens the praise to encompass the entire duration of the conflict, implying that Trump had consistent, long-term clairvoyance. Therefore, taken together, these characteristics allow Zelenskyy to flatter Trump's vanity while portraying himself as an honest, principled truth-teller who will admit unpalatable realities, and thereby demonstrate both integrity and calculated solidarity.

5.4 Argumentation Strategies

5.4.1 Trump

Trump's strategies of argumentation were throughout focused on the topos of consequence, and the argumentation was mostly based on the implicit claim that his own strategy was the only realistic way to a successful outcome, because the utterance:

'I'd be so tough, but you're never going to get a deal that way.'

This proves it and "Maximum toughness" today won't work. Only Trump's plan (unknown) will, so there is no need to define his plan. The magic is in saying "never have a deal" and this makes the previous plan look pointless, therefore it makes Trump's plan look like the only option. Additionally, the demand:

'If you could get a ceasefire right now, I tell you, take it.'

It uses the topos of experience and consequence: the implicit claim is that only a naive and inexperienced leader would not agree to accept a ceasefire that is already available, whereas a more seasoned strategic actor implicitly, Trump recognizes that any opportunity for a settlement must be seized immediately, and the shift



from a conditional formulation to an almost imperative one (I tell you, take it) further reinforces the image of Trump as someone who has better strategic insight.

5.4.2 Zelenskyy

Argumentation was Zelenskyy's second most deployed strategy, and its deployment was notably more elaborate and historically grounded than Trump's. The utterance:

'I am not speaking about just Biden, but most of the time it was Obama—then President Obama, then President Trump, then President Biden, no, President Trump.'

The quote illustrates Zelenskyy's strategic use of the topos of history, and by enumerating various different presidential administrations, the conflict is represented as long-standing and structurally entrenched, and the statement implicitly resists any account that portrays it as a problem that the current administration created, or that an individual leader could solve through his personal efforts. Following Reisigl and Wodak (2016), the quote can be considered as an intertextual argument: the history of prior presidential engagement is intertextually introduced as a conclusion-license that legitimates the de-legitimization of personalistic accounts of the conflict.

Equally forceful is Zelenskyy's deployment of the topos of experiential authority:

'Have you ever been to Ukraine, that you say problems we have?'

But this rhetorical question is doing several things at once, it's a challenge to the interlocutor's right to say they truly understand, it's a claim to superior authority on the part of Zelenskyy, as someone living through the conflict, and it's a shift in the conversation from the abstract language of geopolitics to the concrete reality of lived experience. The implicit claim is that only someone with direct, first-hand experience of the situation has the right to speak with real authority about the situation, and it's a move that undermines Trump's framing of the conflict, without directly contradicting any of his statements.

5.5 Perspectivation Strategies

5.5.1 Trump

Trump's perspectivation strategies were dominated by a pattern of self-universalization—the positioning of his own perspective as coincident with the interests of the entire world. The utterance:

'And for good of the world, I'm aligned with the world.'

This is an excellent instance, and when Trump claims "the world" supports him, he turns his subjective, self-interested opinion into an objective reality. Those who



disagree are cast as opposing the interest of all humanity, because this is a massive assertion. According to van Dijk (1998), this is typical of populist and dictatorial discourse, therefore it is a common tactic used by such leaders:

'Because you are in no position to dictate that.'

In this way, the utterance foregrounds the power hierarchy explicitly: it does not only refuse the demand, but denies that Zelenskyy has any legitimate right to make the demand in the first place, and this is a discursively articulated hierarchical dominance, all the more powerful for its bluntness.

5.5.2 Zelenskyy

Zelenskyy's perspectivation strategies frequently involved a reframing of the discursive ground itself, rather than a direct contestation of Trump's specific claims. The question:

'What kind of diplomacy are you speaking about?'

This is not simply a request for information, and this is a challenge as to whether or not Trump was being "diplomatic." In this defense of the word, Zelenskyy demonstrates his greater understanding of what true diplomacy actually looks like, because he implies that, whatever else Trump's actions may have been, they were not diplomacy. "Let's start from the beginning" is another example of shifting perspective: on the surface, it appears to be a friendly invitation to reinitiate conversation, but it allows Zelenskyy to seize control of the conversation. He alters the starting point and redefines our perception of the entire conversation, thus changing the way we understand the exchange between Trump and Zelenskyy.

5.6 Intensification and Mitigation Strategies

5.6.1 Trump

Intensification and mitigation was Trump's most frequently used cluster of strategies, and his use of them was notable for its extent and its complexity, and intensification, in particular, was usually achieved through stacked, maximising lexical choices.

'He's got tremendous hatred, and I understand that.'

The superlative intensifier tremendous takes Putin's hatred to almost an absolute extreme, but the subsequent phrase and I understand that immediately qualifies and attenuates that assessment, figuring Trump as empathetic and emotionally sensitive, and this move from intensification to mitigation in a single utterance is a rhetorically sophisticated performance of both dominance and compassion at the same time, as is evident with the expletive intensifier.

'You have a damn good chance of coming out.'



But the same is true of the register of visceral, embodied conviction, where the claim is promoted from a tentative probabilistic claim to something that approaches a personal guarantee, and it's a pragmatic intensification that is accomplished by what, formally speaking, is only a mild profanity.

5.6.2 Zelenskyy

Zelenskyy's intensification strategies were frequently accomplished through invocation and repetition. The utterance:

'And God bless—now President Trump will stop him.'

Here, Trump deploys a religious formula not as an intensifier but to invoke a kind of divine legitimation or moral certainty over a political aspiration, and in this context the phrase "God bless" is less of a formulaic politeness and more of a performative blessing that legitimates and grants a sort of prophetic authority to what follows. He also uses repetition as another device of intensification.

'I signed with him, Macron and Merkel, we signed ceasefire, ceasefire.'

The ceasefires multiply, and though each repetition is not an error, it is an escalation: what starts as a fairly straightforward record of diplomatic achievement takes on the cadence of a chant or a prayer, so that the prior accomplishment is lent an ever greater symbolic importance even as the present-day appeal becomes more urgent, and Zelenskyy's mitigation is used almost exclusively to avoid outright confrontation, softening exactly those points of contention that might otherwise disrupt the diplomatic tone:

'I am not telling you.'

and:

'And we are thankful.'

Both serve to de-escalate interactional tension, either by retreating from a position that could lead to confrontation, or by overtly emphasizing the positive emotional aspect of the relationship, and thus lowering the emotional temperature of the exchange without surrendering any territorial ground.

6. Discussion

Taken together, these results show just how thoroughly language, power, and political identity are implicated in high-stakes diplomatic talk, and they also suggest that far from being a peripheral accompaniment to diplomacy, strategic language use is actually a fundamental driver of it. Neither Trump nor Zelenskyy was simply articulating static political positions through his talk; however, both were actively constituting, negotiating, and in some cases subverting the terms of



the interaction as it unfolded. It is particularly noteworthy, then, that both leaders drew so heavily on intensifying and softening language. As Petrova (2022) notes in her study of pandemic leadership discourse, the push-and-pull between intensification and mitigation reflects a fundamental tension in public political communication: leaders must project clear, unambiguous positions, but they must also keep relationships and institutional channels open in order to enable future negotiations, and in the Trump-Zelenskyy interaction, this tension is exacerbated by the power asymmetry. Zelenskyy is far more dependent on Trump's political support than Trump is on Zelenskyy's, which raises the costs of any open confrontation for Zelenskyy, and therefore, the mutual reliance on intensification and mitigation can be seen as the linguistic mechanism by which both leaders sought to balance two competing goals: articulating their own positions clearly while preserving the conditions for ongoing diplomatic engagement. In other words, they are attempting to maintain a sort of "strategic ambiguity" that keeps negotiation possible, and the differences in secondary strategies are equally important, because Trump's striking use of predication - and particularly self-oriented descriptions of his own authority, toughness and deal-making ability - is consistent with a more general pattern of identity-oriented political discourse that many scholars have identified (Müller & Schmidt, 2021; Chen, 2022). From a Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) perspective, Trump's predication strategies reframe the meeting: rather than presenting it as a negotiation between two equal heads of state, it presents itself as a stage on which a single dominant figure - Trump - demonstrates and ratifies his own superior qualities, which is itself an exercise of power, and it gradually shifts Zelenskyy's position from that of equal conversation partner to that of someone who is receiving Trump's generosity, guidance, and expertise.

Zelenskyy's counter-strategy of argumentation, based on history, lived experience, and cause-and-effect reasoning, constitutes a distinctly different manner of exercising discursive power, namely one that, in DHA terms, corresponds to the communicative posture of an actor in a structurally weaker position, and since he cannot match Trump in terms of self-asserted personal authority, Zelenskyy accumulates legitimacy by piling up verifiable historical examples and morally charged causal arguments. This is in line with Al-Fahad (2021), who argues that in asymmetric diplomatic conflicts, the topos of history is the most effective weapon available to the weaker side, because by grounding the exchange in a shared, documentable past that Trump cannot simply dismiss, Zelenskyy is able to create a space in which rationality and principle can to some extent compensate for structural power. The perspectivation strategies of the two leaders offer further insight into the ways in which power is contested in this encounter, and Trump

frequently universalizes his own standpoint, treating his own position as if it were equivalent with the interests of "the world", which is a defining feature of what van Dijk (1998) calls "elite discourse": the tendency of powerful actors to appropriate universal or collective authority in order to legitimize their own positions. Zelenskyy, by contrast, uses perspectivation in a different way, because rather than arguing within Trump's evaluative frame, he tries to shift the basis of the discussion, as is particularly illustrative in his question, "What kind of diplomacy are you speaking about?", which is not just a rejection of Trump's claim, but also a rejection of the conceptual language that makes Trump's claim intelligible in the first place.

This fusion of both observations also undermines the standard assumption that structural power and discursive power in diplomacy operate in a zero-sum relationship because mainstream diplomatic theory tends to see a state's structural power - its economic, military and institutional endowments - as the only relevant causal factor in determining an outcome. However, the analysis here suggests a more nuanced relationship between the two, while structural power certainly determines the outer bounds of what is possible for each actor, the fact that identity, legitimacy and authority are exercised through language injects another autonomous dimension to the interaction. Consequently, Zelenskyy's discourse in particular shows how a structurally weaker party can use language in ways that shift some of the moral and rhetorical burden of an interaction, even if the structural imbalance of material power is completely unchanged.

7. Conclusions

This article has examined the Trump-Zelenskyy conversation during their 2025 Oval Office meeting using the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) as both theoretical framework and principal analytical tool, and the findings of this analysis confirm both of the hypotheses proposed at the beginning of this study. First, intensification and mitigation were the two most salient common strategies, which functioned together to regulate the diplomatic tone and maintain strategic ambiguity, and second, Trump's greater use of predication and Zelenskyy's greater use of argumentation not only reflected the structural power differential between the two leaders but also reflected the different political objectives and constraints faced by each leader. The article makes three contributions to the literature. Empirically, it offers the first systematic DHA-based analysis of the 2025 Trump-Zelenskyy meeting, a highly geopolitically salient event whose language has to date been primarily studied in journalistic rather than scholarly terms.

Theoretically, the article demonstrates the applicability of DHA to high-stakes, contemporary bilateral diplomacy, and that the framework remains precise and analytically robust even in unscripted, adversarial, and linguistically heterogeneous discourse. Methodologically, the article illustrates the utility of combining quantitative frequency counts with close, context-sensitive qualitative analysis, and provides a model for DHA research that treats discourse as both patterned and interpretive.

The study should be of interest not only to scholars of applied linguistics and discourse analysis, but to practitioners and observers of diplomacy as well, because for scholars, it contributes to the growing recognition that diplomatic talk is not a transparent medium for the transmission of information, but a performative space in which political identities, relationships and power relations are continuously negotiated and reconstituted. For practitioners and observers of diplomacy, the analysis highlights how in high-stakes communication settings, what is said cannot be divorced from how it is said: a hedge, an exaggeration or a pointed rhetorical question can be just as significant as the concrete policy content it frames. However, there are also clear limitations to the study, since it is based on a single case, and on a relatively short, public segment of a much longer meeting, so its findings cannot be taken as representative of the full communicative repertoire of either leader, and the decision to exclude non-verbal cues and prosodic features from analysis is another constraint, given the important role these play in determining the pragmatic force of political communication. Thus, possible avenues for future research could involve adding multimodal data, using DHA on a bigger, longitudinal corpus of Trump's and Zelenskyy's diplomatic interactions, or comparing this encounter with other high-stakes meetings to see how far the patterns found here can be generalised, and reception-focused studies examining how different audiences interpret and evaluate the discursive strategies outlined in this article would offer a useful addition to the production-oriented perspective adopted in this study.

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