

Language in Conflict Situation: Investigating Discursive Strategies in President Joe Biden's Speech on the Russian-Ukraine War

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the language used in former President Joe Biden's Political Speech on the Russian-Ukraine war, which is relevant in today's political landscape. The objective is to investigate the types of discursive strategies used to validate and invalidate the decisions and actions of both warring parties and describe the linguistic features through which these discursive strategies are realised and their functions in the speech. The study adopts van Leeuwen's (2008) framework for legitimisation and delegitimisation, complemented with a qualitative descriptive method in examining fifteen texts purposively sampled from a political speech delivered by the former president on February 21, 2023. The analysis indicates that the discursive strategies of authorisation (personal authority, impersonal authority, and authority of tradition), moral evaluation (evaluation and analogies), rationalisation (instrumental and theoretical rationalisation), and mythopoesis (cautionary tales and single determination) serve to legitimise the United States and NATO's support for the Ukrainian government in its defensive fight against Russia and delegitimise Russia's aggressive confrontation of Ukraine. The study underscores the pivotal role of language in shaping political narratives and influencing public perception. The legitimisation

and delegitimisation strategies foreground positive and negative representations of two political camps (The "US" vs "Them") in the speech. The "Us (denoting The United States, NATO, and Ukraine) vs. Them (denoting Russia)" dichotomy in Biden's speech reflects a desire to justify "our" (i.e., NATO's) actions and policies by showing that they are correct, beneficial, and carried out following international law, while "their" (i.e., Russia's) actions and policies are not in line with the normative order because they are perverse, deviant and pose a threat to the Ukrainian people's lives. The study concludes that language is an effective tool by which political gladiators legitimise their actions and delegitimise those of their rivals.

Keywords: Language conflict, Joe Biden, De-legitimization, discursive strategies, legitimisation, Russian-Ukraine Conflict.

Introduction

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which began in February 2014 in response to the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, is one significant political issue that has recently drawn much attention. Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine and backed pro-Russian separatists who were battling the Ukrainian military in the Donbas war. As Russian and Ukrainian forces controlled the eastern border regions, the battle descended into an ongoing standoff marked by frequent bombardment and fighting along the frontlines. Russian armies attacked a completely unprepared Ukraine in February 2022 after Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a unique military campaign against the country (Wilson, 2001). Since the crisis began, leaders from various nations have given speeches that either legitimised or delegitimised the causes of the war and the acts of the presidents of both nations. In addition to the leaders of other nations, US President Joe Biden has also publicly stated whether or not he supports the choices and actions of the two nations. This study examines one of the political speeches delivered by Joe Biden, the former President of the United States, on 21 February 2023 to ascertain the discursive strategies used to legitimise or delegitimise the decisions and actions of the warring parties. It also describes the linguistic features used to realise these discursive strategies and their functions in speech.

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Conceptual Review

Legitimation and delegitimation are two constructs relevant to this study. Legitimation is constructing an action as productive, advantageous, correct, comprehensible, requisite and admissible in a specific context (Vaara, 2014). It is a fundamental aspect of language use that entails offering valid justifications for actions that have drawn criticism from others in the past or present (van Dijk, 1998). Legitimation is the process by which speakers seek authorisation for actions and social relations and elucidate their positive actions to justify why they are rational and required. According to Fairclough & Fairclough (2012), legitimation validates an action that can be acknowledged publicly. The process of legitimation involves two levels of justification. The first level is the justification for action based on a reason, and the second level is the justification for that reason based on a system of widely accepted norms, values, and beliefs (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). The foregoing statement implies that interlocutors justify their demeanours by pointing out that they adhere to particular social standards, values, and beliefs (Ross & Rivers, 2017). The following are examples of legitimation techniques: general ideological principles, charismatic leadership projection, boasting about performance, positive self-presentation, and arguments about voters' wants" (Chilton, 2004). Legitimation in discourse parallels delegitimation, which is the deliberate production and dissemination of unfavourable perceptions of the other (Screti, 2013). Delegitimation involves questioning opponents' plans and demonstrating that they are not aligned with values and norms because they do not include any constructive, valuable, or moral action (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Delegitimation encompasses presenting oneself negatively, condemning, oppressing, segregating, and criticising one's uprightness and rationality (Chilton, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

In his framework, van Leeuwen (2008) distinguishes four legitimation and delegitimation strategies and their linguistic realisations. These strategies include authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation and mythopoesis. As stated by Tienari & Vaara (2008), these strategies serve as a mechanism through which language works and is employed to establish

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legality. Authorisation legitimises something by citing the authority of law, tradition, custom, and/or individuals with institutional authority. Six types of authorisations are distinguished: impersonal authority, role model authority, expert authority, personal authority, tradition-based authority, and conformity-based authority. Personal authority is the legal power where a person's decisions or actions are driven by the influence of his position in society. Such individual utilises their power to take actions or make decisions they are not required to defend or explain. Language is used to achieve this kind of authority, where the person in charge uses a modality of obligation in their speech. Expert authority is the kind of authority impacted by a person's expertise. Verbal or mental process clauses realise this authority. Role model authority is where people's decisions or actions are driven by their superiors' or role models' deeds, convictions, or viewpoints. Impersonal authority is the kind of authority where rules, policies, and guidelines influence decisions and actions. Nouns like policy, regulation, rule, and law and their adjectives or adverbs like mandatory, obligatory, or compulsory make it a reality. Traditional authority is the kind of authority that is shaped by local customs or standards. The established norms of the place serve as a guide for decisions and actions. Authority of conformity is the kind of authority impacted by practices consistent with society's standards. Legitimation by conformity is acknowledged using a high-frequency modality and an explicit comparison (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Moral evaluation is predicated on moral principles not enforced by a centralised authority and delegitimises actions without explanation. Rather than employing overt language techniques, it is identified through common-sense knowledge (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Evaluation, abstraction and analogies are the three categories that separate moral evaluation. Evaluation is the process of expressing specific attributes of behaviours or objects and praising them about a set of values by using evaluative adjectives like good, bad, healthy, regular, and natural. The abstraction strategy is the presentation of moral evaluation practices in an abstract manner that moralises them by removing a characteristic that connects them to moral value discourses. Analogies are comparisons to legitimise or delegitimise. A situation known as an

implicit analogy occurs when a term used to describe one social practice's activity is used to describe another, and the constructive or negative implications related to the other undertaking are then transmitted to the first undertaking. A similar conjunction or comparison circumstances are used to express an explicit analogy.

Rationalisation refers to legitimation that appeals to the audience's and speaker's shared mental interpretations of existing information to actualise cognitive approval or credibility (van Leeuwen, 2008, p.108). It is divided into two categories: instrumental rationalisation and theoretical rationalisation. Instrumental rationalisation justifies actions by citing their objectives, applications, and results. It is further divided into goal-oriented, means-oriented, and effect-oriented instrumental rationalisations. Goal-oriented instrumental rationalisation endorses legality by giving individuals whose activities are motivated by conscious or unconscious motives or goals a sense of purpose. The means-oriented instrumental rationalisation defines an action's purpose as one that can be achieved using particular methods. Effect-oriented rationalisation actualises legitimation by constructing purpose in actions with a specific negative or positive outcome, consequence, or result for the people. Theoretical rationalisation employs a descriptive statement of the factual state of affairs to accomplish legitimation. It is divided into definition, explanation, and experiential theoretical rationalisation. The definition of theoretical rationalisation actualises legitimation by defining an activity in terms of another moralised activity. Experiential rationalisation expresses legitimation through proverbs, moral maxims, and wise sayings. Experiential theoretical rationalisation refers to system bodies of knowledge used in institutionalised practices to realise legitimation.

Mythopoesis or storytelling can be used to establish legitimacy. The four kinds of mythopoesis are cautionary tales, moral tales, single determination and overdetermination. Cautionary tales indicate dire repercussions of choosing an unwise course of action. Moral tales refer to glorifying or idealising the deeds of a specific character or cause of action. Single determination refers to a narrative in which events are presented to legitimise or delegitimise them. Overdetermination

represents social actors participating concurrently in different social practices (van Leeuwen, 2007, p117-118). The present paper applies this framework in examining Biden's political speech for the discursive strategies employed in legitimising or delegitimising the actions of the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine.

Methodology

The data of the present study consists of the speech made by former President Joe Biden on February 21, 2023, ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. More specifically, the data comprises purposively sampled excerpts from the speech. The speech has been downloaded from the U.S. Department of State website. The present study adopts a qualitative methodological approach. To analyse the collected data, van Leeuwen's (2008) legitimisation and delegitimation strategies are employed. The qualitative approach and van Leeuwen's methods have been chosen as they are deemed more suitable for the current study and help yield an in-depth data analysis. Instances of legitimisation and delegitimation strategies and their linguistic realisations are identified in the data. Significant examples representing the strategies, the linguistic devices used to realise them in the data, and the functions fulfilled by these strategies are elucidated.

Data Analysis

This section illustrates how Joe Biden used legitimisation and delegitimation techniques in his speech. The legitimisation and delegitimation techniques proposed by Leeuwen (2008) are used to analyse the data.

Authorisation

This tactic describes the individual or group with the right to use lawful authority. The following examples illustrate how President Joe Biden's speech uses personal authority, impersonal authority, and authority of tradition in the data.

Example One

And the principles that had been the cornerstone of peace, prosperity, and stability on this planet for more than 75 years were at risk of being shattered (Biden's Speech, 2023).

In this instance, President Joe Biden's statement uses impersonal authority, which is defined as authority legitimised through the use of laws, rules, and regulations. By using the word "principles" to refer to the values that have served as the foundation for peace, prosperity, and stability on the planet for decades, Biden undermines the legitimacy of Russia's aggression against Ukraine by demonstrating that it goes against the rules of international agreements that are binding on all members of the United Nations. When Biden says that the principles that had sustained peace, prosperity, and stability in the world for decades were at risk of being crushed, he is referring to the unlawful activities of the Russian troops in Ukraine. The second category of legitimisation used in Biden's political speech is personal authority, as shown below.

Example Two

And yesterday, I had the honor to stand with President Zelensky in Kyiv to declare that we will keep standing for the same thing no matter what (Biden's Speech, 2023).

Here, legitimisation by personal authority is used when President Joe Biden tells his audience that the Ukrainian government and people have received firm assurances and hope during difficult times. Europe, America, and NATO are all addressed with the pronominal "we" in this text. Biden's use of legitimate authority to make a declaration on behalf of NATO and Europe may be hinged on his office as the President of the United States and the United States, regarded as the most powerful nation in the world. Another significant justification for his exercise of personal authority here is the United States' role as one of the biggest donors to NATO, a testament to the financial power behind his authority. The verbal process "declare" is used to legitimise personal authority

linguistically. The choice of a verbal process in this text is in tandem with the position of van Leeuwen (2007) that utterances exemplifying personal authority contain some form of obligation modality deployed in legitimising such authority. The decision to use a verbal process depends on the President's ability to communicate such a statement about America, Europe, and NATO's readiness and willingness to support Ukraine. The authority of tradition, as indicated below, is the next category of authorisation to be examined in the speech.

Example Three

Our support for Ukraine will not waiver, NATO will not be divided,
and we will not tire (Biden's Speech, 2023).

Using the authority of tradition, President Joe Biden aims to justify NATO's backing for Ukraine in this instance. The pronominal "our" in this text performs a collective function, representing NATO as a body. Article 5 of the NATO charter, which declares that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be deemed an attack against them all, demonstrates the legitimacy of the principles that underpin the alliance's decision to support Ukraine due to its willingness and readiness to enlist as member of NATO. Over time, NATO has faithfully upheld this tradition. Modal and material verbs such as "will not waiver," "will not tire," and "will not be divided" are used to legitimise NATO's stance and readiness to support Ukraine.

Moral Evaluation

The speech employs the strategy of moral evaluation, which is realised through evaluation and analogies. Evaluation is realised through evaluative adjectives and analogies through comparisons. The use of evaluation and analogies is shown below.

Example Four

One year ago, the world was bracing for the fall of Kyiv. Well, I have

just come from a visit to Kyiv, and I can report; Kyiv stands strong!
Kyiv stands proud. It stands tall. And most importantly, it stands free.
(Biden's Speech, 2023).

In example four, President Joe Biden refers to Kyiv's resilience in the face of Russian aggression and attacks on its territory. He employs the affirmative assessment metrics "stands tall," "stands proud," "stands strong," and "stands free." By employing these positive evaluative indicators, he validates Kyiv's capacity to protect its territory and itself following Russian attacks. He adds that Kyiv's resolve and determination to withstand any Russian subjugation have shocked the world, which had been expecting to see Kyiv defeated by Russia. This text demonstrates that evaluative markers are employed to delegitimise Ukraine's foes' pessimistic expectations and validate the Ukrainian people's solidarity with their nation.

Example Five

President Putin's craven lust for land and power will fail. And the Ukrainians people's love for their country will prevail (Biden's speech, 2023).

With phrases like "...the Ukrainian people's love for their country will prevail," President Joe Biden aims to present a positive picture of the Ukrainian people. On the other hand, he presents a negative picture of President Putin by using the pejorative assessment, "President Putin's lust for land and power will fail." Accordingly, these evaluative statements both legitimise Ukrainians' patriotism and undermine President Putin's excessive attempts to subjugate Ukraine. President Joe Biden uses moral evaluation in example six when discussing the scope of Russia's war crimes against Ukraine.

Example Six

Extraordinary brutality from Russian forces and mercenaries. They

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have committed depravities, crimes against humanity, without shame or compunction. They've targeted civilians with death and destruction. Used rape as a weapon of war. Stolen Ukrainians' children in an attempt to steal Ukrainians future. Bombed train stations, maternity hospital, school, and orphanages (Biden's Speech, 2023).

To illustrate the extent of Russia's war crimes against Ukraine, Biden uses derogatory terms like "extraordinary brutality" and "committed depravities." In these expressions, attributive adjectives such as "extraordinary" and "committed" are deployed as evaluative indicators to modify the nouns "brutality" and "depravities". These evaluative indicators are further complemented with the verbs "targeted" and "bombed," as captured in the expressions "targeted civilians with death and destruction" and "bombed train stations, maternity hospitals, schools, and orphanages." Biden frowns at these dastardly acts carried out by Russian troops in Ukraine. By portraying Russian forces and mercenaries in a negative light, he undermines the legitimacy of their destructive activities in Ukraine.

Example Seven

A choice between chaos and stability. Between building and destroying. Between hope and fear. Between democracy that lifts up the human Spirit and the brutal hand of the dictator who crushes it (Biden's Speech, 2023).

President Joe Biden uses an analogy to express moral judgment in his remarks about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. He points out that, as humans, we must make various daily decisions and that our future depends on them. He employs the analogy technique to present two sets of opposing options, addressing his audience. His use of both positive and negative evaluation adjectives delegitimises Putin's autocratic lifestyle and legitimises Ukraine's democratic practices. For example, chaos is the opposite of stability; it goes from hope to fear and building to destruction.

Since their current decision will either make or mar their future, Biden tells his audience that if they must live in a world where democracy is paramount, they should make an informed decision.

Rationalisation

Legitimation through rationalisation is employed in the speech. The categories of instrumental rationalisation in the speech are namely, goal-orientation, means-orientation and effect-orientation. They are displayed in examples (8) – (10) as shown below:

Example Eight

The largest land war in Europe since World War two had begun (Biden’s Speech, 2023).

To highlight the impact of conflict on human lives, President Joe Biden discusses Europe’s biggest land war since World War II. He accomplishes this by demonstrating the consequences of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine through the use of the orientation rationalisation technique. The past perfect tense “had begun” is used linguistically to realise this strategy, signifying that the most important land war had begun.

Example Nine

President Putin’s craven lust for land and power will fail (Biden’s Speech, 2023).

Biden draws attention to Putin's plans to invade Ukraine in text nine, stating that they are motivated by his "lust for land and power.". The former president emphasises Putin's war against Ukraine by using goal-orientation rationalisation. Furthermore, Biden reassures his listeners that Putin's war against Ukraine will fail. By nominalising "Putin's craven lust for land and power," the goal-orientation legitimisation tactic is achieved.

Example Ten

One year after the bombs began to fall and Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, Ukraine is still independent and free (Biden's speech, 2023).

Using the phrase "bombs began to fall and Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine" to describe Russia's actions in Ukraine, Excerpt 10 illustrates the application of the means-orientation rationalisation in Biden's speech. Russia is aggressively attempting to subjugate Ukraine in order to achieve its goals. President Biden does point out that Ukraine is still strong and independent despite a string of bombings and the retreat of Russian tanks into the country. Apart from instrumental rationalisation in the speech, theoretical rationalisation is also used, achieved through definition, explanation, and prediction, as shown below.

Example Eleven

The United States and the nations in Europe do not seek to control or destroy Russia. The west was not plotting to attack Russia, as Putin said today. And millions of Russian citizens who only want to live peace with their neighbours are not the enemy (Biden's Speech, 2023).

Example eleven employs theoretical rationalisation in the form of a definition. President Biden outlines the intentions of the United States and other European countries toward Russia. He discusses the goal by characterising it in terms of the moral behaviour of the United States and all European countries that do not aim to subjugate or destroy Russia. By employing this tactic, Russia's violent actions in Ukraine are delegitimised, and America and Europe's intentions toward Russia are legitimised.

Example Twelve

It's simple. If Russia stopped invading Ukraine, it would end the

war. If Ukraine stopped defending itself against Russia, that would be the end of Ukraine (Biden's Speech, 2023).

The use of theoretical rationalisation as an explanation to describe the participants in practice is illustrated in Example 12. President Joe Biden describes Russia and Ukraine in this text. According to him, the war will end if Russia removes its troops from Ukraine and stops bombing the nation, but if Ukraine gives up on self-defence, they will be captured and then placed under Russian rule. By making this declaration, President Biden both validates Ukraine's act of self-defence against Russian forces and delegitimises Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Example Thirteen

As Ukraine continues to defend itself against the Russia onslaught, and launch counter-offensive of its own, there will continue to be hard and very bitter days, victories and tragedies (Biden's Speech, 2023).

In example thirteen, President Joe Biden uses theoretical justification through prediction, outlining what Ukraine can anticipate going forward as it continues to defend itself against Russia's assault and launches its own counteroffensive. Biden's prediction of the future is summed up in the statement, "There will continue to be hard and very bitter days." By using this tactic, President Biden both legitimates Ukraine's ongoing self-defence against Russian attacks and expressly delegitimises Russia's assault on Ukraine.

Mythopoesis

In mythopoesis, narratives are used to legitimise and delegitimise actions. This strategy is employed in the speech by using cautionary tales and single determination, as shown in examples (14) - (15).

Example Fourteen

The European union and its member states have stepped up with unprecedented commitment to Ukraine, not just in security assistance, but economic, and humanitarian, refuge assistance, and so much more (Biden's speech, 2023).

Example 14 uses a single determination when President Joe Biden discusses the actions taken by the European Union and its member states to support Ukraine due to its willingness and readiness to become a NATO member. He summarises the aid and support that Ukraine is receiving from the union and its member nations. The application of a single determination validates the European Union's obligations to Ukraine in this instance.

Example Fifteen

If Ukraine stopped defending itself against Russia, it would be the end of Ukraine (Biden's Speech, 2023).

In example sixteen, President Joe Biden discusses Ukraine's determination to protect itself from Russian attacks. According to him, Ukraine's existence will come to an end if it gives in to Russian pressure. The use of cautionary tales helps to justify Ukraine's attempts to defend itself against Russia's aggression.

Conclusion

The current study has investigated the language used in political speech to validate or invalidate the decisions and actions of two warring parties, using van Leeuwen's (2008) legitimisation and delegitimisation strategies. It has also examined the linguistic devices employed to realise these discursive strategies and their functions in speech. The data analysis reveals that the discursive strategies used in speech are authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis. Regarding authorisation, President Joe Biden's statements employ three subcategories of this approach: impersonal authority, personal authority, and authority of conformity. Russia's war

against Ukraine is delegitimised through the use of impersonal authority. Using personal authority justifies the United States' decision to back the Ukrainian government. The authority of tradition justifies NATO's position to assist Ukraine in its defensive struggle against Russia. Moral evaluation in speech is realised through evaluation and analogies. Through this discursive, the president uses evaluative adjectives to represent NATO's support for Ukraine and Ukraine's defence of its sovereignty in a positive light. On the other hand, Russia's actions against Ukraine are represented in a negative light using evaluative markers. Both theoretical and instrumental rationalisation are the rationalisation types employed in the speech. Through goal orientation, instrumental rationalisation is accomplished. The study's conclusions show that both legitimisation and delegitimation strategies are used to create positive and negative presentations as captured in the "Us versus "Them" dichotomy reflected in Biden's speech. By demonstrating that "their" actions and policies are perverse, deviant, and dangerous to other people's lives, the "them" dichotomy reflects a desire to defend "our" actions and policies by arguing that they are proper, advantageous, and compliant with international law. The clear and direct application of legitimisation and delegitimation techniques in President Joe Biden's speech demonstrates this.

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