

THE ROLE OF DIPLOMATIC TERMS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL AND INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE

Kurbanbaeva Ruza Sultanbay qizi
Second-year Master's student in
"Linguistics (french language)",
Bukhara State University, Uzbekistan.
qurbanbayevaroza272@gmail.com
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20603960>

Abstract

This article examines the constitutive role of diplomatic terminology in shaping political and international discourse. Drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA), speech act theory, and frame analysis, it argues that diplomatic language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but an active instrument of power, persuasion, and ideological construction. Through analysis of key terms such as sovereignty, multilateralism, normalization, engagement, and strategic ambiguity, the study demonstrates how lexical choices in diplomatic contexts frame conflicts, legitimize policies, and construct collective identities. The article further explores how the institutionalization of specific terminological registers within bodies such as the United Nations, the European Union, and bilateral treaty frameworks consolidates particular world-views while marginalizing alternatives. The findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between language and power in international affairs.

Keywords: *diplomatic language, political discourse, critical discourse analysis, international relations, terminological power, speech acts, frame analysis*

Introduction

Language has long been recognized as a foundational element of political life. From Aristotle's conception of the human being as a political animal defined by logos to contemporary critical linguistics, scholars have understood that the way we speak about the world is inseparable from the way we organize and contest it. Nowhere is this insight more consequential than in the domain of international relations, where the choice of a single word—"conflict" versus "war," "freedom fighter" versus "terrorist," "occupied territory" versus "disputed region"—can determine the legitimacy of states, the fate of treaties, and the mobilization of international coalitions.

Diplomatic language constitutes a specialized register: a historically sedimented, institutionally regulated, and strategically deployed system of communication. Its terms are rarely accidental. They are the product of negotiation, precedent, and power. Understanding their role in the construction of political and international discourse is therefore not merely an academic exercise; it is essential to any serious analysis of how global order is produced and reproduced.

This article makes three principal contributions. First, it provides a theoretical framework for analyzing diplomatic terminology through the intersection of critical discourse analysis (CDA), speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), and frame analysis (Entman 1993). Second, it offers close readings of a set of strategically important diplomatic terms, tracing their semantic histories and political effects. Third, it examines the institutional contexts—multilateral organizations, treaty frameworks, summit communiqués—in which these terms acquire their authority and exert their influence.

Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) proceeds from the premise that language is a social practice and that discourse—understood as language-in-use embedded in social structures—both reflects and reproduces relations of power (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 2008). In the international arena, this means that the texts produced by diplomatic actors—speeches, communiqués, resolutions, treaties—are not transparent windows onto pre-existing political realities but active constructions of those realities.

CDA attends to three interrelated dimensions of discourse: text (the linguistic features of communicative artifacts), discursive practice (the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption), and social practice (the broader social and institutional contexts in which discourse is embedded) (Fairclough 1992). Applying this framework to diplomatic language requires examining not only what terms mean but how they come to mean it, who deploys them, in what institutional settings, and with what political effects.

Speech act theory

Austin's (1962) distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts provides another essential analytical tool. Diplomatic language is shot through with performatives: declarations of war and peace, recognitions of states, ratifications of treaties, and expressions of condemnation are not mere descriptions but actions that change the world by being uttered. When a United Nations Security Council resolution 'decides,' 'demands,' or 'urges,' these terms carry different degrees of legal obligation and political force—differences that diplomatic actors exploit with great precision.

Searle's (1969) elaboration of speech acts into categories such as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations further enriches the analysis. Diplomatic discourse makes heavy use of commissives (commitments to future action) and declarations (utterances that change institutional reality), and the strategic ambiguity often cultivated in diplomatic texts can be understood as a deliberate exploitation of the indeterminacy between these categories.

Frame Analysis

Entman's (1993) concept of framing—the selection and salience of elements of perceived reality to promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and remedies—complements CDA by focusing on the cognitive dimensions of discourse. Diplomatic terms serve as frames: they activate particular cognitive schemas, foreground certain actors and relationships, and relegate others to the background. The term 'humanitarian intervention,' for instance, frames a military action primarily in terms of its alleged beneficent purpose rather than its coercive means, thereby mobilizing moral justifications while attenuating scrutiny of legality and geopolitical interest.

Key diplomatic terms and their discursive functions

No concept is more fundamental to the architecture of modern international order than sovereignty. Since the Peace of Westphalia (1648), sovereignty has served as the master-term organizing relations among states: it posits the legal equality of states, the inviolability of territorial integrity, and the inadmissibility of external interference in domestic affairs. Yet the term's apparent stability conceals a contentious history of contestation.

The tension between 'sovereignty as supreme authority' and 'sovereignty as responsibility' (Evans & Sahnoun 2001) has become one of the defining fault lines of contemporary international discourse. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, adopted at the 2005 World Summit, reconceptualizes sovereignty not as an absolute shield but as a conditional entitlement contingent on the protection of populations. This semantic shift—from sovereignty as right to sovereignty as

duty—has profound discursive consequences: it opens a legitimate space for international intervention where none formally existed before, while simultaneously creating a rhetorical resource available to powerful states to justify actions undertaken for strategic as much as humanitarian purposes.

Multilateralism

'Multilateralism' has functioned in post-1945 diplomatic discourse as a normatively loaded term denoting cooperation through inclusive international institutions governed by generalized principles (Ruggie 1992). Its opposite—unilateralism—carries pejorative connotations in most mainstream diplomatic registers. To describe a policy as 'multilateral' is simultaneously to describe it and to legitimate it; the term performs an evaluative as well as a descriptive function.

The strategic deployment of 'multilateralism' is particularly evident in debates over global governance. Actors who feel disadvantaged by unilateral exercises of great-power capability invoke multilateralism as a counter-norm; great powers, for their part, may embrace multilateral rhetoric while structuring institutions so as to preserve their own dominance. The term thus functions as a site of ideological contestation in which the same word is claimed by competing political projects with very different material implications.

Normalization

'Normalization' in diplomatic parlance refers to the process by which states transition from hostile or adversarial relations to a condition of regularized diplomatic, economic, and sometimes military ties. The term carries powerful ideological freight: it implies that the prior state of affairs was abnormal—a deviation from a natural or desirable baseline—and that the move toward normalized relations represents progress, rationality, and maturity.

This framing is far from neutral. Critics of normalization processes point out that the term can obscure the political concessions required of weaker parties, naturalize asymmetric power relations, and pre-empt legitimate grievances by characterizing continued resistance as irrational or obstructionist. The debate over normalization of relations with authoritarian states—a recurring feature of contemporary diplomacy—illustrates how the term structures the range of politically articulable positions, making it difficult to oppose engagement without appearing to favor the status quo of conflict.

Strategic Ambiguity

Strategic ambiguity refers to the deliberate cultivation of imprecision in diplomatic language as a tool for maintaining policy flexibility, managing competing domestic and international audiences, and deferring irresolvable conflicts. The classic example is the United States policy on Taiwan, which commits to neither explicit defense guarantees nor abandonment, preserving maximum freedom of action while minimizing the risk of triggering either Taiwanese independence declarations or Chinese military action.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, strategic ambiguity reveals the extent to which diplomatic language is simultaneously communicative and non-communicative: it says enough to signal commitment but not enough to create enforceable obligations. Understanding when and why states choose ambiguity over clarity is essential to decoding the political meaning of diplomatic texts. What appears on the surface as vagueness or evasion often reflects precisely calibrated political calculation.

Institutional contexts of diplomatic language

The United Nations provides the most extensively institutionalized setting for the production and circulation of diplomatic language. The terminological repertoire of the UN Charter

—'international peace and security,' 'friendly relations,' 'self-determination,' 'human rights'—has shaped the grammar of international legitimacy for eight decades. UN resolutions are particularly rich sites for discourse analysis: the distinction between operative clauses using 'decides' (binding), 'calls upon' (non-binding but authoritative), 'urges' (hortatory), and 'encourages' (weak) encodes a precise hierarchy of obligation that diplomatic actors navigate with great sophistication.

The negotiation of language in multilateral settings is itself a political process. The drafting of Security Council resolutions, General Assembly declarations, and treaty texts involves intensive contests over terminology. The selection of a preambular phrase, the choice between 'condemns' and 'deplores,' the insertion or omission of 'all necessary means'—these lexical decisions often constitute the substantive political agreement itself, reflecting the limits of what states can publicly acknowledge and the compromises they are willing to make.

Regional Organizations

Regional organizations such as the European Union, the African Union, and ASEAN have developed their own distinctive terminological registers, reflecting their particular institutional logics and political cultures. The EU's diplomatic vocabulary—'acquis communautaire,' 'conditionality,' 'deepening and widening,' 'subsidiarity'—constructs a vision of supranational integration that goes well beyond the state-centric framework of traditional diplomacy. These terms do not merely describe the EU's institutional architecture; they embody and reproduce a particular normative project with transformative ambitions.

ASEAN's discourse, by contrast, is organized around principles of 'non-interference,' 'consensus,' and the 'ASEAN Way'—a rhetorical construction that privileges procedural norms of consultation and voluntary compliance over binding enforcement mechanisms. This terminological framework reflects and reinforces a specific model of regional governance that prioritizes state sovereignty and elite consensus over supranational authority and democratic accountability.

Power, language, and counter-discourse

The foregoing analysis might suggest that diplomatic language is exclusively an instrument of the powerful—a means by which dominant states and established institutions impose their preferred frameworks on international discourse. This would be an incomplete picture. Weaker states, non-governmental organizations, civil society actors, and transnational social movements have all developed strategies for contesting, subverting, and reappropriating dominant diplomatic terminology.

The history of the concept of 'self-determination' illustrates this dynamic. Originally deployed by the great powers at Versailles to reorganize the European map on the principle of national homogeneity, self-determination was appropriated by anti-colonial movements in the mid-twentieth century and transformed into a powerful instrument of resistance against imperial domination. This semantic transformation—achieved through the sustained discursive labor of political actors across decades—demonstrates that diplomatic terminology is not simply imposed from above but is contested and renegotiated over time.

Similarly, the concept of 'climate justice' represents an attempt by developing states and civil society organizations to reframe climate change not merely as an environmental or technical challenge but as a question of international equity, historical responsibility, and distributive justice. By introducing this term into the climate negotiation process, these actors seek to expand the range of politically articulable demands and shift the burden of adjustment toward historically high-emission industrialized states.

Conclusion

This article has argued that diplomatic terminology is not a neutral or merely technical medium of international communication but an active constitutive force in the production of political and international discourse. Through the deployment of key concepts such as sovereignty, multilateralism, normalization, and strategic ambiguity, diplomatic actors frame conflicts, legitimize interventions, manage competing audiences, and construct the shared understandings—and shared misunderstandings—on which international order depends.

The theoretical framework developed here—integrating critical discourse analysis, speech act theory, and frame analysis—provides tools for decoding the political work performed by apparently technical or procedural terminology. Applying this framework to specific terms and institutional contexts reveals the extent to which the language of diplomacy encodes contestable assumptions about authority, legitimacy, and the proper ordering of international society.

Several directions for future research suggest themselves. Comparative studies of terminological evolution across different historical periods would illuminate the relationship between shifts in the language of diplomacy and transformations in the underlying structure of international order. Corpus-linguistic analyses of large-scale diplomatic archives would permit more systematic identification of patterns in terminological use and change. And ethnographic research on the actual negotiating practices through which diplomatic language is produced would complement the textual analyses offered here with attention to the embodied, interactional dimensions of discursive construction.

Ultimately, taking diplomatic language seriously as an object of scholarly inquiry is not merely an intellectual exercise. At a moment when the international order faces profound challenges—from great-power competition to climate change to the erosion of multilateral institutions—understanding how language constructs, sustains, and potentially transforms that order is a task of considerable political urgency.

Adabiyotlar, References, Литературы:

1. Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.
3. Evans, G., & Sahnoun, M. (2001). *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre.
4. Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
5. Fairclough, N., & Fairclough, I. (2012). *Political Discourse Analysis: A Method for Advanced Students*. London: Routledge.
6. Fierke, K. M. (2002). Links across the abyss: Language and logic in international relations. *International Studies Quarterly*, 46(3), 331–354.
7. Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
8. Holsti, O. R. (1967). Cognitive dynamics and images of the enemy. *Journal of International Affairs*, 21(1), 16–39.
9. Ruggie, J. G. (1992). Multilateralism: The anatomy of an institution. *International Organization*, 46(3), 561–598.
10. Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

11. van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and Power*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
12. Weldes, J. (1999). *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
13. Wendt, A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
14. Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.