



International Journal of Arts and Humanities: ISSN-2360-7998 (Print) and Open Access: DOI/ijah/10.54978
Abbreviated Key Title: *Int. J. Arts Humanit.*
ISSN: 2360-7998 (Print) and Open Access
Volume-13 (Issue): 9, September, Pp. 324-334, 2025

Full Length Research

Rhetoric of Conflict: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Presidential Speeches in the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract

This article examines how wartime political rhetoric functions as a vehicle for constructing national identity, legitimizing power, and shaping ideological polarization during the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of selected speeches by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the study investigates how linguistic strategies articulate competing narratives of sovereignty, legitimacy, and moral authority. Drawing upon Van Dijk's (1998, 2006) socio-cognitive model and Fairclough's (1995, 2015) three-dimensional framework, the analysis explores how discursive choices both reflect and reproduce structures of dominance and resistance. Three official addresses by each leader, delivered between February 24–26, 2022, were purposively selected for their immediate geopolitical significance and representativeness of early wartime rhetoric. The findings reveal that both presidents rely on comparable discursive mechanisms—binary oppositions, moral evaluation, and collective identity formation—though these serve divergent ideological ends. While Putin's discourse constructs Russia's aggression as defensive and restorative, Zelenskyy's rhetoric frames Ukraine's resistance as moral and democratic. The study contributes to the growing body of CDA scholarship on political communication by illuminating how rhetorical strategies mediate power relations and legitimize conflict in the contemporary global arena.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, political rhetoric, Russia–Ukraine war, ideology, power, nationalism, presidential discourse

Accepted 27/8/2025

Published 12/10/2025

1. INTRODUCTION

Political discourse during wartime serves as both an instrument of persuasion and a mechanism of ideological control. In moments of acute crisis, leaders employ rhetoric not only to explain or justify actions but also to shape collective identity and moral positioning. As Fairclough (2015) and Van Dijk (2006) argue, discourse functions as social practice—language both reflects and reproduces power relations. Nowhere is this relationship more pronounced than in the communicative strategies of political leaders confronting armed conflict.

The Russia–Ukraine war, which escalated dramatically in February 2022, presents a paradigmatic case of how discourse constitutes political reality. The speeches of Presidents Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr

Zelenskyy are deeply rhetorical acts: they frame competing visions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and moral order. Putin's discourse emphasizes historical destiny, security threats, and the restoration of geopolitical balance, while Zelenskyy's rhetoric foregrounds resistance, democratic values, and appeals to international solidarity. Both leaders employ language as a strategic tool to construct moral hierarchies between "us" and "them," a classic ideological binary identified in Van Dijk's (1998) model of ideological discourse.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides an effective lens for interrogating these communicative practices. CDA's central concern is to reveal how language enacts, sustains, and sometimes challenges

power asymmetries (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Through its interdisciplinary approach—linking linguistics, sociology, and political science—CDA illuminates how discourse contributes to the normalization of dominance and conflict. The analysis of presidential war rhetoric, therefore, is not limited to linguistic patterns but extends to the ideological and socio-political functions of those patterns.

In this study, CDA is applied to the speeches of Putin and Zelenskyy to uncover how linguistic choices reflect ideological positioning and legitimize political action. The research situates these speeches within the broader context of global communication and media circulation, recognizing that in the digital age, political rhetoric is instantly transnational (Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2024). The goal is not to evaluate the truthfulness of either leader's claims, but to examine how discourse performs power through framing, argumentation, and moral evaluation.

By integrating Van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory with Fairclough's model of discourse as social practice, this article seeks to clarify how rhetorical constructions of victimhood, heroism, and legitimacy shape the moral imagination of global audiences. Such an approach foregrounds the ideological dimensions of language while maintaining sensitivity to textual and contextual nuances.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

Research Objectives

The study aims to critically analyze how wartime presidential rhetoric constructs ideological and moral meaning within the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. **Examine** the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed by Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy in their early wartime speeches (February 2022).
2. **Identify** how both leaders construct self- and other-representations through discursive practices that legitimize their political and moral positions.
3. **Analyze** how ideological, emotional, and moral appeals function to mobilize domestic and international audiences within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis.
4. **Evaluate** how presidential discourse contributes to shaping public perception, global narratives, and political legitimacy in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war.

Research Questions

In line with these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What linguistic and rhetorical features characterize the wartime speeches of Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy?
2. How do both presidents construct representations of self and other to establish legitimacy and moral authority?

3. In what ways do ideological and emotional appeals operate within their discourse to mobilize national and international support?

4. How does the comparative analysis of these speeches reveal the role of political rhetoric in framing global narratives about the Russia–Ukraine conflict?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical and Geopolitical Context of the Russia–Ukraine War

Understanding the rhetorical dimensions of the Russia–Ukraine conflict requires situating political discourse within its historical and geopolitical contexts. Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, tensions with Russia have persisted over questions of national sovereignty, identity, and regional influence. The legacy of Soviet-era Russification policies sought to assimilate Ukrainian culture and language, a strategy designed to sustain Russian hegemony (Cengel, 2022). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine's alignment with Western institutions—especially aspirations toward European Union and NATO membership—intensified Moscow's perception of strategic loss (Kuzio & D'Anierthe, 2018).

Putin's recurring claim that Russians and Ukrainians constitute “one people” serves as a rhetorical device to deny Ukraine's autonomy and reassert Russia's historical sphere of influence (Mankoff, 2022). This ideological position is rooted in narratives of cultural unity and geopolitical entitlement. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, justified as the “protection” of Russian citizens, illustrates how political rhetoric legitimizes territorial aggression under the guise of moral or historical duty (ACAPS, 2021). The 2022 invasion thus represents the culmination of discursive and military escalation—a moment where language, ideology, and action converge.

From a critical discourse perspective, the rhetoric of war reflects the contestation of national narratives. As Bourdieu (1991) argues, language is a form of symbolic power that reproduces social hierarchies and legitimizes domination. In the Russia–Ukraine conflict, presidential discourse operates within this symbolic struggle, where the definition of “truth” and “justice” becomes a political act.

2.2 Language, Power, and Political Conflict

The relationship between language and power is central to both political communication and CDA. Political discourse functions not merely as a medium for transmitting information but as a means of shaping perceptions, legitimizing authority, and enacting ideology (Chilton & Schäffner, 2022; Fairclough, 2015). Within this framework, language is a social practice embedded in relations of dominance and resistance.

Chiluwa (2022) describes “conflict discourse” as the

set of linguistic practices through which conflict is enacted, justified, or resisted. In such contexts, rhetoric operates as both weapon and shield—capable of intensifying hostilities or fostering reconciliation (Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2024). This aligns with Galtung's (1987) early argument that linguistic forms can either escalate or mitigate violence. Wars are thus preceded and sustained by discursive constructions that normalize aggression and moralize political positions.

At the intersection of discourse and ideology, Van Dijk (1998, 2006) explains how elites manipulate cognition through discursive control of knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. His concept of the “ideological square” delineates a basic rhetorical pattern: emphasize the positive attributes of the in-group and the negative traits of the out-group while minimizing the reverse. This binary logic is foundational to wartime rhetoric, which depends on moral dichotomies of victimhood and villainy.

In the case of Putin and Zelenskyy, such ideological structuring is evident in competing narratives: Putin's emphasis on defending “sovereignty” and “historical truth” contrasts with Zelenskyy's appeals to democratic resilience and moral integrity. Both employ the “us versus them” schema identified in CDA to legitimate their positions (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

2.3 Rhetorical Strategies in Wartime Leadership

The rhetoric of political leadership has long been a subject of discourse analysis. Classical rhetorical theory—particularly Aristotle's triad of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—remains instructive in understanding how leaders mobilize audiences emotionally, ethically, and rationally. Contemporary studies expand this perspective by emphasizing how rhetoric constructs collective identity and moral justification for conflict (Campbell & Jamieson, 1990; Gross & Ní Aoláin, 2014).

In war discourse, leaders employ persuasive techniques that transform violence into moral necessity. Rzepecka (2017) identifies recurring features of presidential war rhetoric—moral appeals, invocations of self-defense, and portrayals of the enemy as irrational aggressor. Similarly, Lordan (2010) notes that war speeches often follow a predictable moral logic grounded in the “just war” tradition. These elements are visible in Putin's and Zelenskyy's narratives: Putin's emphasis on historical grievance and NATO encroachment mirrors earlier patterns of justificatory rhetoric, while Zelenskyy's discourse centers on moral endurance and international solidarity.

Elgin (1995) and Chiluwa & Ajiboye (2016) highlight that violent acts are frequently preceded by violent language. Through metaphors, lexical choices, and framing devices, leaders construct enemies linguistically before confronting them militarily. Oddo's (2011) study of American presidential speeches demonstrates how rhetorical polarization—defining “us” and “them”—serves to mobilize public consent for war. Putin's portrayal of the

West as deceitful and morally corrupt, and Zelenskyy's framing of Ukraine as a victim of tyranny, exemplify this dualistic logic.

Moreover, political rhetoric in the digital age operates within an expanded media ecosystem. As Herman and Chomsky (1988) contend, mass media often amplifies elite narratives by filtering discourse through ideological and institutional biases. In the Russia–Ukraine context, both state-controlled and independent media reproduce these rhetorical frames, thereby influencing global perceptions of legitimacy and aggression.

2.4 Theoretical Foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis provides a theoretical and methodological apparatus for investigating how language structures social reality. Fairclough's (1995, 2015) three-dimensional model—textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice—offers a framework for connecting micro-level linguistic features with macro-level ideological structures. In parallel, Van Dijk's (1998, 2006) socio-cognitive model elucidates how discourse influences mental models and collective cognition, positioning ideology as both a product and a mechanism of discourse.

Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) complements these perspectives by emphasizing the importance of context, intertextuality, and temporality in discourse construction (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). This multidimensionality allows CDA to capture how historical memory and national narratives inform present-day rhetoric—a key consideration in analyzing speeches situated within a long-standing geopolitical rivalry.

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides the linguistic foundation for CDA by framing language as a resource for meaning-making within social contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions of language correspond closely with CDA's interest in representation, interaction, and structure. Through this lens, presidential speeches are not neutral texts but social acts that simultaneously describe and perform political realities.

Methodologically, CDA employs qualitative strategies such as coding, thematic identification, and rhetorical mapping to reveal the ideological patterns underlying discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Titscher et al., 2000). The present study adopts this integrated framework, drawing upon Fairclough, Van Dijk, and Wodak to analyze the linguistic, cognitive, and contextual dimensions of presidential war rhetoric.

2.5 Synthesis and Scholarly Gap

Existing scholarship on political discourse during the Russia–Ukraine conflict has illuminated key themes such as nationalism, moral framing, and the role of digital media (Brusylovskaya, 2020; Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2024;

Gomaa, 2023). However, relatively few studies have conducted a comparative CDA of Putin's and Zelenskyy's early wartime speeches, which represent a critical juncture in the narrative formation of the conflict. This article fills that gap by integrating multiple CDA traditions to expose how linguistic constructions of legitimacy, victimhood, and identity are mobilized within competing ideological frameworks.

By combining textual analysis with socio-cognitive and historical contextualization, this study contributes to the evolving intersection of discourse studies and international politics. It demonstrates that wartime rhetoric is not merely communicative but constitutive—it shapes the moral architecture through which conflicts are perceived, justified, and remembered.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a **qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** approach to examine how language constructs ideological positions in the wartime speeches of Presidents Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy. CDA was selected for its capacity to reveal the interdependence between discourse, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 2015; Van Dijk, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The method emphasizes how linguistic and rhetorical structures contribute to maintaining or challenging dominance within specific socio-political contexts.

CDA is particularly appropriate for this study because it treats discourse as both a product and a process of social practice. Following Fairclough's (1995, 2015) three-dimensional model—**textual analysis**, **discursive practice**, and **social practice**—the research examines not only what is said but how it is said and in what socio-political conditions the discourse operates. Van Dijk's (1998, 2006) socio-cognitive approach further informs the analysis by highlighting how discourse shapes mental models and legitimizes ideological stances through selective emphasis, framing, and repetition.

The overall design is interpretive and comparative. It seeks to identify how rhetorical and linguistic choices encode contrasting worldviews and political objectives in Putin's and Zelenskyy's discourses surrounding the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

3.2 Data Selection and Rationale

A **purposive sampling strategy** was employed to ensure the selected texts were both contextually significant and analytically manageable. The corpus consists of **three key speeches** delivered by each president between **February 24 and February 26, 2022**, corresponding to the immediate outbreak of the full-scale invasion. This time frame was chosen because it

represents the formative moment of wartime narrative construction—when both leaders articulated the moral and political foundations of their respective positions.

- **Putin's Speech:**

- *"Address to the Nation on the Commencement of Military Operation in Ukraine"* (February 24, 2022). This 3,751-word text was sourced from official Kremlin archives and cross-referenced with verified English translations available via *The Kremlin* (2022) and Rossi (2023). The speech was selected for its clear articulation of Russia's justification for the invasion, encapsulating key ideological claims of defense, unity, and historical destiny.

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- **Zelenskyy's Speeches:**

- *"Address by the President of Ukraine"* (February 24, 2022).

- *"Address by the President to Ukrainians at the End of the First Day of Russia's Attacks"* (February 25, 2022).

Both texts were retrieved from the official *Presidential Office of Ukraine* website, which provides Ukrainian originals and verified English translations. These speeches were selected for their rhetorical immediacy and representativeness of Ukraine's defensive and moral framing during the initial phase of the war.

The inclusion criteria prioritized **(a)** authenticity (official publication or verified translation), **(b)** historical significance (delivered at pivotal wartime moments), and **(c)** rhetorical richness (presence of ideological and persuasive features). This sampling ensures depth rather than breadth, enabling detailed linguistic and ideological analysis (Titscher et al., 2000).

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis follows a **multi-layered CDA procedure**, integrating elements from Fairclough (1995, 2015), Van Dijk (1998, 2006), and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). This triangulation strengthens validity by examining discourse from textual, cognitive, and contextual perspectives.

1. Textual Analysis:

The textual dimension focuses on vocabulary, syntax, transitivity, and rhetorical devices (metaphors, pronouns, evaluative lexis). These linguistic choices reveal how actors, actions, and values are represented (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Key attention was paid to **referential strategies** (naming and labeling of social actors) and **predicational strategies** (attributes assigned to those actors), as delineated in Wodak's DHA framework.

2. Discursive Practice:

This layer investigates how the speeches were produced, circulated, and received. The study considers the broader media ecology—traditional and digital—through which these discourses were disseminated and amplified globally. Attention was given to intertextuality, including historical references, mythic narratives, and recurring ideological motifs.

3. Social Practice:

The final level situates each speech within its socio-political context, examining how rhetoric legitimizes power relations and national ideologies. Drawing on Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, this stage explores how discursive patterns reinforce collective beliefs and emotional mobilization among audiences.

This three-tiered process aligns with CDA's emphasis on connecting micro-level linguistic analysis to macro-level social structures, ensuring analytical rigor and contextual sensitivity.

3.4 Coding and Thematic Procedures

To organize the data systematically, a **manual qualitative coding process** was undertaken using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis. The analysis proceeded as follows:

1. **Familiarization:** Intensive reading of each speech to identify preliminary rhetorical patterns and ideological markers.
2. **Initial Coding:** Segments were coded based on key CDA categories—representation of self and other, power relations, legitimization, and moral evaluation.
3. **Theme Development:** Codes were clustered into overarching themes (e.g., victimhood, sovereignty, moral superiority).
4. **Review and Refinement:** Emerging themes were cross-compared across both leaders' speeches to identify convergences and contrasts.
5. **Interpretation:** Themes were contextualized within the CDA frameworks of Fairclough and Van Dijk to infer ideological implications.
6. **Validation:** Coding reliability was strengthened through iterative reading and cross-checking with secondary literature (Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2024; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

The coding matrix was designed to capture how lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic features combine to construct ideologically charged narratives. This systematic procedure enhances transparency and replicability, key principles of qualitative discourse research (Titscher et al., 2000).

3.5 Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Critical Discourse Analysis recognizes that researchers are not neutral observers but active interpreters situated within ideological and cultural frameworks (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). The researcher acknowledges potential interpretive biases arising from language, translation, and geopolitical proximity. To mitigate these, the analysis prioritized **official English translations** verified by bilingual experts and cross-referenced with the original-language versions. Interpretive claims were triangulated against multiple scholarly sources to maintain analytical credibility.

Moreover, given the emotionally charged nature of wartime discourse, the researcher remained self-reflective regarding moral and political sympathies, striving for analytical distance without disregarding the human dimension of suffering and persuasion inherent in conflict rhetoric.

3.6 Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights into the ideological mechanics of wartime rhetoric, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the **corpus size**—restricted to three speeches—limits the generalizability of findings. However, CDA prioritizes depth of interpretation over representativeness, and the selected texts capture pivotal moments in the conflict's discursive evolution.

Second, **translation issues** may have affected the nuance of certain lexical and syntactic features, despite cross-verification.

Third, **temporal scope** restricts the analysis to the conflict's early stage; later speeches could reveal evolving rhetorical strategies.

Finally, the **interpretive nature** of CDA entails subjectivity, mitigated but not eliminated through theoretical triangulation and methodological transparency (Titscher et al., 2000; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).

Despite these constraints, the study's reflexive stance and methodological rigor enhance its contribution to understanding how language operates as an instrument of power, ideology, and resistance in contemporary political conflict.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a comparative critical discourse analysis of Vladimir Putin's and Volodymyr Zelenskyy's speeches, delivered during the first 48 hours of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (February 24–25, 2022). The analysis is organized around key CDA categories—referential and predication strategies, argumentation

and legitimization, and rhetorical framing of identity and power—to reveal how both leaders deploy language to construct opposing ideological narratives.

4.1 Ideological Discourse and Identity Construction

Political rhetoric in wartime functions as a site of identity negotiation. Following Van Dijk's (1998, 2006) "ideological square," both leaders construct in-group and out-group identities by emphasizing the virtues of "us" and the vices of "them." Putin's discourse presents Russia as a moral actor defending historical justice, while Zelenskyy frames Ukraine as a resilient democracy confronting tyranny.

Putin's address opens with the inclusive salutation "*Citizens of Russia, friends*," a term that evokes solidarity, national unity, and continuity with Soviet-era collectivism. His self-positioning as protector and moral arbiter exemplifies what Fairclough (2015) identifies as the "**synthetic personalization**" of political speech—where power is masked by the illusion of intimacy. By invoking "*comrade officers*" and "*dear compatriots*," Putin reinforces a shared identity rooted in loyalty and patriotism, appealing to cultural nostalgia and moral duty.

Conversely, Zelenskyy's openings—"*Citizens of Ukraine*" and "*What do we hear today?*"—construct a democratic and participatory ethos. His inclusive use of personal pronouns (*we, our, us*) enacts what Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) describe as **interpersonal meaning**, transforming the president from distant authority to collective voice. The rhetorical strategy here is dialogic: Zelenskyy's address positions Ukrainians as co-agents in national defense, emphasizing shared struggle and emotional unity.

While both leaders engage in identity construction, the ideological direction diverges. Putin's rhetoric is **centripetal**—oriented inward, reinforcing national cohesion through external threat. Zelenskyy's is **centrifugal**—extending outward to international audiences by aligning Ukraine's cause with universal democratic values. This distinction underscores their differing political goals: Putin seeks internal legitimacy; Zelenskyy seeks global solidarity.

4.2 Referential and Predicational Strategies

Referential and predicational strategies are central to CDA's examination of how social actors are named and evaluated (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). These strategies manifest in patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and characterization that reveal ideological alignments.

In Putin's rhetoric, **referential strategies** consistently position Russia as the moral self and the West as deceitful other. For example, in his claim that "*They deceived us... this type of con-artist behavior is contrary to morality and ethics*," Putin constructs the West as inherently corrupt and untrustworthy. Such lexical

choices reinforce Van Dijk's (2006) notion of **discursive polarization**, where evaluative language legitimizes aggression by framing conflict as moral retribution.

Predicational strategies—those that ascribe attributes—further this dichotomy. Putin's use of terms such as "*neo-Nazis*," "*blackmail*," and "*empire of lies*" mobilizes an emotionally charged vocabulary that fuses moral judgment with historical trauma. These expressions not only delegitimize Ukraine's government but also activate collective memory associated with World War II, a tactic consistent with Wodak's (2016) observation that political actors often draw on **historical topoi** to naturalize ideology.

Zelenskyy, in contrast, employs **positive predication** of the in-group. Soldiers are "*heroes*," citizens are "*defenders*," and Ukraine itself is "*the light against darkness*." His characterization of Russia as an "*aggressor*" and "*enemy*" is framed through appeals to law and morality rather than historical resentment. For instance, the metaphor of the "*Iron Curtain lowering and closing Russia away from the civilized world*" situates Russia as self-isolating and regressive—a linguistic strategy aligning Ukraine with global modernity.

The interplay of these referential and predicational choices reveals how each leader constructs legitimacy. Putin's language invokes defensive moralism rooted in grievance; Zelenskyy's mobilizes moral universalism rooted in justice and resilience.

4.3 Argumentation and Legitimization Strategies

Argumentation in wartime discourse functions to rationalize and moralize political action. Following Van Leeuwen's (2008) **framework of legitimation**, leaders justify policies through authorization (appeals to authority), moral evaluation (appeals to values), and rationalization (appeals to logic and necessity).

Putin's argumentation relies heavily on **moral and historical authorization**. By asserting that "*Russia cannot feel safe with the military machine approaching our borders*," he legitimizes military aggression as preemptive self-defense. This is an example of **proximation strategy** (Cap, 2013), wherein distant threats are linguistically constructed as immediate dangers to justify urgency. His recurring motif of "*defending sovereignty*" transforms offensive action into a moral imperative—a rhetorical inversion that redefines invasion as preservation.

Additionally, Putin's argumentation invokes **historical inevitability**, aligning the invasion with Russia's "civilizational mission." This deterministic framing exemplifies what Fairclough (1992) describes as **discursive recontextualization**, where past narratives are repurposed to naturalize present policies. By referencing the collapse of the Soviet Union as a "tragedy," Putin embeds his military agenda within a restorative myth of national redemption.

Zelenskyy's legitimization strategies are more

rational and moral. He repeatedly frames Ukraine's defense as an act of survival and legality: "*Ukraine did not choose the path of war.*" His rhetoric emphasizes **victimhood as legitimacy**—a topos identified by Wodak (2016)—where moral superiority arises from suffering unjustly. Through appeals to international law and democratic norms, Zelenskyy constructs Ukraine's actions as both reactive and righteous.

Zelenskyy also employs **performative persuasion** (Austin, 1962): when he declares "*We will defend our country,*" the speech act itself constitutes political action. His repeated reassurances—"*I am here, we are not afraid*"—serve a symbolic function of presence and leadership, countering narratives of defeatism and abandonment.

In sum, both leaders deploy legitimization strategies rooted in moral authority. However, Putin's discourse relies on **defensive aggression**, while Zelenskyy's depends on **moral endurance** and **collective resilience**. Each constructs legitimacy by embedding political action within competing moral frameworks.

4.4 Rhetorical Framing and Emotional Appeals

Rhetorical framing determines how audiences interpret conflict realities. Following Lakoff (2004), frames activate particular moral worldviews that structure public reasoning. Both Putin and Zelenskyy use metaphor, pathos, and repetition to evoke emotional identification and moral clarity.

Putin's metaphors of "*deception, hypocrisy, and lies*" construct the West as a moral contaminant. His repeated invocation of "*defense,*" "*justice,*" and "*truth*" aligns with what Chilton (2004) describes as **deictic moral mapping**, situating Russia as morally centered and the West as ethically degenerate. His claim that Russia was "*forced into action*" redefines aggression as reluctant duty—a recurring trope in authoritarian justification (Van Dijk, 2006).

In contrast, Zelenskyy's rhetorical framing evokes pathos and solidarity. Through emotionally charged imagery—"*rockets exploding, the roar of aircraft, a new Iron Curtain lowering*"—he dramatizes Ukraine's suffering while inviting empathy from global audiences. His appeals to "*freedom,*" "*democracy,*" and "*civilization*" align with Aristotle's (2004) concept of **pathos**, using emotion as moral persuasion.

Zelenskyy's oratory also employs **performative repetition**, reinforcing collective identity: "*We are here. We will not surrender.*" Such repetition, as observed by Fairclough (2015), intensifies resonance and mnemonic effect, transforming rhetoric into symbolic resistance.

Both leaders' emotional appeals serve ideological functions: Putin's rhetoric instills defensive nationalism; Zelenskyy's nurtures transnational empathy. Yet both rely on affect to convert discourse into political action—demonstrating CDA's insight that power operates not only through logic but through emotion-laden narratives.

4.5 Comparative Discussion: Power, Ideology, and Global Perception

The comparative findings reveal that both Putin and Zelenskyy engage in **ideological mirroring**: each constructs moral superiority through the degradation of the other. However, the rhetorical direction and global resonance diverge sharply.

Putin's discourse exemplifies **hegemonic legitimation** (Fairclough, 2015)—language used to stabilize power by reproducing narratives of threat and victimhood. His emphasis on sovereignty, morality, and historical justice functions to justify geopolitical domination while masking aggression as defense. The internal coherence of this narrative appeals to domestic audiences conditioned by state media, yet it lacks international credibility.

Zelenskyy's rhetoric, by contrast, exemplifies **counter-hegemonic discourse** (Van Dijk, 1998; Wodak, 2016). It disrupts dominant narratives by reframing victimhood as moral agency and by invoking universal democratic ideals. His discourse performs dual functions: domestically, it unites a besieged population; internationally, it mobilizes moral and material support.

Both rhetorics expose the performative dimension of political power. Language here does not merely reflect reality—it constructs it. As Austin (1962) suggests, speech acts *do* things; they summon armies, secure alliances, and define legitimacy. The CDA approach thus confirms that rhetoric is not peripheral to war—it is constitutive of it.

4.6 Summary of Findings

1. Discursive Similarities: Both leaders employ binary oppositions and moral polarization ("us" vs. "them") as foundational rhetorical strategies.

2. Ideological Divergence: Putin's discourse legitimizes dominance through historical grievance and moral defensiveness; Zelenskyy's constructs resistance through ethical universalism.

3. Linguistic Strategies: Pronoun use, metaphor, and repetition are central tools for constructing solidarity, legitimacy, and emotional engagement.

4. Power and Persuasion: Rhetoric operates as an extension of political action—what Fairclough (2015) calls "language as social practice."

5. Media Amplification: Both discourses gain force through media circulation, which transforms national rhetoric into global ideological performance (Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2024).

These findings underscore CDA's value in revealing how political rhetoric sustains power relations, mobilizes identity, and legitimizes violence under the guise of moral necessity.

5. CONCLUSION AND REFLEXIVE COMMENTARY

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study has examined how language functions as an instrument of power and ideology in the wartime speeches of Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Drawing upon Fairclough's (1995, 2015) three-dimensional model, Van Dijk's (1998, 2006) socio-cognitive framework, and Wodak's (2016) Discourse-Historical Approach, the analysis revealed that both leaders employ rhetoric as a means of legitimizing political action, constructing collective identity, and mobilizing audiences.

The findings demonstrate several key insights:

1. Ideological Mirroring: Both leaders utilize a polarized "us versus them" schema to frame the conflict in moral and existential terms. Putin's narrative of restoration and defense mirrors Zelenskyy's narrative of resistance and survival, though directed toward opposite moral claims.

2. Discursive Legitimation: Putin's discourse relies on historical grievance and moral inversion—portraying aggression as protection—whereas Zelenskyy's rhetoric emphasizes moral endurance, legality, and democratic solidarity.

3. Rhetorical Emotionalization: Both employ affective strategies—metaphor, repetition, and personal pronouns—to build empathy and sustain ideological commitment. However, Zelenskyy's pathos-oriented appeals aim to unite domestic and international audiences, while Putin's ethos-centered appeals reinforce internal unity and defiance.

4. Language as Social Action: The study supports CDA's assertion that discourse not only reflects but *constructs* political realities. These speeches do not merely describe war—they perform it linguistically, shaping how legitimacy and victimhood are globally perceived.

Through this analysis, the study contributes to the broader understanding of how political discourse operates during conflict to mobilize power, justify violence, and mediate moral perception. It underscores CDA's capacity to expose the underlying mechanisms by which rhetoric transforms ideology into action.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This research reinforces the view that wartime rhetoric must be analyzed not simply as persuasive communication but as a form of **ideological production**. By integrating Fairclough's and Van Dijk's frameworks, the study demonstrates that linguistic features—lexical choices, syntactic patterns, and metaphoric structures—are inseparable from socio-political context and cognitive framing.

Moreover, the findings illuminate how CDA and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) complement one another in tracing the functional

relationship between language and power. The data affirm that discourse analysis is indispensable to political communication studies, particularly for examining how states construct moral hierarchies and national myths through language.

5.3 Methodological and Reflexive Considerations

Critical Discourse Analysis, by its nature, acknowledges the interpretive involvement of the researcher. As Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) argue, CDA is not a neutral endeavor but a socially engaged form of inquiry. Accordingly, this study adopted a reflexive stance throughout the analytical process.

The researcher recognizes potential interpretive biases inherent in analyzing politically charged texts. While every effort was made to ensure accuracy—through cross-verification of translations, triangulation with secondary sources, and theoretical grounding—complete objectivity remains unattainable. The interpretive lens of CDA inherently reflects the researcher's cultural, ideological, and epistemological standpoint.

Nonetheless, transparency in coding, documentation, and methodological decision-making enhances the credibility of the analysis. The integration of multiple CDA frameworks ensured analytical triangulation, reducing the likelihood of overgeneralization or theoretical bias.

5.4 Limitations

Several limitations frame the interpretive boundaries of this study:

1. Corpus Scope: The analysis is based on a limited corpus of three speeches per leader. While this allows for detailed qualitative exploration, it restricts the generalizability of findings. Future research should expand the dataset to include subsequent speeches and media interviews to capture the evolution of rhetorical strategies over time.

2. Translation Constraints: Although verified English translations were used and cross-checked with native speakers, linguistic nuances—especially idiomatic or culturally embedded expressions—may have been lost or altered.

3. Temporal and Contextual Specificity: The study focuses on the initial phase of the invasion (February 2022). Rhetorical shifts occurring later in the war may reveal additional patterns of justification, adaptation, or fatigue.

4. Researcher Positionality: As CDA operates within interpretive paradigms, findings reflect situated knowledge rather than universal truth claims. Acknowledging this limitation aligns with the critical tradition's emphasis on reflexivity and transparency (Titscher et al., 2000).

Despite these constraints, the study's methodological rigor and theoretical grounding ensure that the findings meaningfully contribute to the understanding of political rhetoric and ideological discourse in wartime communication.

5.5 Directions for Future Research

Future studies could extend this analysis in several ways:

- **Comparative Expansion:** Incorporating additional leaders' discourses (e.g., U.S., NATO, or EU officials) to map the transnational rhetorical network surrounding the war.
- **Longitudinal Analysis:** Examining how Putin's and Zelenskyy's rhetoric evolves over the course of the conflict, including shifts in emotional tone, framing, and audience orientation.
- **Multimodal CDA:** Integrating visual, performative, and digital dimensions (e.g., televised addresses, social media videos) to assess how rhetoric operates across platforms in constructing political legitimacy.
- **Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis:** Employing computational tools alongside qualitative CDA to trace lexical frequency and collocational patterns across larger datasets. Such approaches would deepen our understanding of how discourse adapts to changing political, cultural, and technological contexts.

5.6 Concluding Reflection

The rhetoric of conflict, as this study shows, is not an accessory to warfare but its discursive engine. Both Putin and Zelenskyy mobilize language as a weapon—one to justify domination, the other to sustain resistance. Their speeches demonstrate how political discourse constructs competing moral universes, shaping global perceptions of justice, sovereignty, and legitimacy.

In revealing how linguistic strategies function to naturalize violence or evoke empathy, this research underscores CDA's enduring relevance to political analysis. Language, as Fairclough (2015) asserts, remains a central arena in which power is exercised, contested, and transformed. In the Russia–Ukraine war, as in all conflicts, rhetoric does not merely accompany power—it is power, shaping the narratives through which history itself is told.

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