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The Discursive Construction of Legitimation in Regional Conflict Discourses of Ukraine and Russia from the Perspective of Proximization

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Abstract

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022 has triggered intense discourse battles, in which the discursive construction of legitimacy has become a core battlefield for both sides. Drawing on Piotr Cap's Proximization Theory and corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, this study examined the speeches delivered by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during the initial phase of the Russia-Ukraine military confrontation in 2022. The analysis revealed that both leaders systematically employed spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization strategies to legitimize their respective positions while delegitimizing the adversary. Putin predominantly utilized temporal proximization to frame Russia's military operation as a preemptive self-defense against anticipated NATO expansion, whereas Zelensky favored spatial and axiological proximization to portray Ukraine as an innocent victim of unprovoked aggression. These divergent discursive patterns reflect contrasting ideological orientations and serve distinct legitimation functions: Putin sought to justify defensive military action, while Zelensky aimed to mobilize national resistance and secure international solidarity. This study contributed to the growing body of critical cognitive linguistic studies on conflict discourse by demonstrating how proximization operates as a powerful rhetorical mechanism for manufacturing consent in political communication.

Keywords

regional conflict discourse, legitimation, Proximization Theory, Russia-Ukraine conflict, presidential speeches

1. Introduction

In 2022, Russia and Ukraine entered a full-scale military conflict. This event was widely regarded as a

critical turning point in contemporary geopolitics and has drawing widespread global attention and academic interest in the discourse dimension of regional conflicts. As ground military operations continued, intense rhetorical battles also emerged in diplomatic and public spheres. Both sides of the conflict tried to establish their own narrative dominance and gain moral legitimacy for their respective positions (Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2025). In this context, political speeches have become a key tool for ideological expression. Through carefully chosen language, leaders can construct the framework of events, assign responsibility, and mobilize public support (Van Leeuwen, 2007).

For a long time, the construction of legitimacy in political discourse has been seen as a basic mechanism for the operation and maintenance of power (Foucault, 1980; Habermas, 1979). In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have adopted the framework of cognitive linguistics to explore the micro-level mechanisms that help realize macro-level legitimacy. Among these research approaches, the Proximization Theory proposed by Pieter Cap (2006; 2013) is developed from the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and it has proven to be a very effective analytical tool. According to this theory, speakers can strategically adjust people's perception of spatial, temporal and axiological distances between the in-group (IDC) and out-group (ODC) entities. In this way, they can create a sense of imminent threat and provide justification for taking preemptive or defensive actions (Cap, 2013). This framework is particularly useful for analyzing political rhetoric during crisis periods, because changing the perceived distance of threat can greatly influence the public's acceptance of controversial policies (Zhang & Yang, 2019).

This study takes Proximization Theory as its core analytical framework to conduct a systematic comparative analysis of speeches delivered by Putin and Zelensky in the early stage of the conflict (February to March 2022). By examining how the two leaders applied proximization strategies in terms of space, time and value judgments to build their legitimacy, this research aims to figure out the cognitive mechanism of discourse in war contexts. It may also contribute to the theoretical discussion about the relationship between language and ideology in international relations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Review of Legitimation in Regional Conflict Discourses

Research on legitimacy strategies in regional conflict discourse has attracted considerable academic attention, especially in the field of CDA. Van Leeuwen (2007; 2008) put forward a comprehensive typology of legitimacy strategies, including authorization, moralization, rationalization, and mythic narration. These legitimacy strategies usually work together and are interrelated in practice. This has been confirmed by many subsequent studies. For instance, Reyes (2011) analyzed Bush's speeches justifying the Iraq War, as well as Barack Obama's rhetoric surrounding the War in Afghanistan. Lin and Miao (2016) also looked at Obama's Afghanistan speeches from a CDA perspective. More recently, Simonsen (2019) examined Israel's diplomatic discourse during its conflict with Hamas. Across these studies, scholars have consistently found that political leaders draw on multiple legitimacy strategies to

make their propositions more persuasive.

In conflict contexts, legitimacy discourse is always accompanied by the de-legitimization of the opposing side, thereby forming a binary opposition of “us” and “them”, simplifying the complex geopolitical reality (Van Dijk, 2008). This was revealed in Bush’s and Blair’s speeches to portray the Iraq War as a just fight against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (ibid.), and in Obama’s speech attempted to legitimize the prospect of a direct American military engagement in Syria (Mirhosseini, 2017).

Research on the Russia-Ukraine conflict has identified several recurrent legitimation patterns. Russia’s discourse focused on its alleged heroic mission in Ukraine and the delegitimation of the Ukrainian government and its external supporters as ultimate perpetrators (Zavershinskaia, 2024). In contrast, Zelensky’s remarks were described as emphasizing the identity of the victims, democratic values, and international solidarity, shaping Ukraine as an advocate of European civilization in defense of against brutal aggression (Tomczak & Goloshchuk, 2024). However, most existing studies have focused on unilateral discourse or one-way analysis, lacking a comprehensive comparative study of the three-dimensional approach strategies in bilateral presidential speeches. Chilwa and Ruzaitė (2025) conducted a comparative analysis of the construction of legitimacy between Russia and Ukraine in the speeches of Putin and Zelensky, but this study was limited to a small number of purposeful war speech samples and failed to combine corpus-assisted analysis with qualitative contextual interpretation.

2.2 Review of Proximization Theory

Proximization Theory has made significant progress in the cognitive-pragmatic analysis of political discourse. It combines Chilton’s (2004) theory of discourse space with Rakoff’s conceptual metaphor framework, systematically explaining how speakers achieve persuasive effects by manipulating the perceived distance. Since its initial proposal, Proximization Theory has undergone significant refinement and expansion. Cap (2017) extended this framework to multimodal proximization phenomena in digital communication environments, while subsequent studies have explored its application in trade conflict discourse (Zhang & Yan, 2019), immigration rhetoric (Wu & Niu, 2018), and environmental discourse (Zhang *et al.*, 2021; Gong & Zhang, 2025).

Early applications of Proximization Theory in regional conflict discourse have mainly focused on the political discourse of the United States, including the military intervention in Iraq (Cap, 2006, 2008, 2013), Bush’s speeches after the 9/11 incident (Dunmire, 2011), and the speeches during the Syrian war (Zhang & Yan, 2019). However, when it comes to interstate conflicts, the use of this theory has been rather limited. Most existing work has taken the form of single-case analysis rather than genuine comparative research.

Although research on regional conflict discourse and Proximization Theory has been growing, several important gaps remain. Firstly, Proximization Theory has been widely applied to analyze political discourse in Western contexts, especially the speeches of US presidents. But for inter-state conflicts in non-Western regions, the application of this theory is still quite scarce. At present, most studies on

regional conflict discourse explore the discourse of one single political party from different theoretical perspectives. They rarely adopt Proximization Theory as a consistent comparative framework across opposing sides. This has led to limited understanding of how Proximization Theory works in symmetric or asymmetric patterns during military confrontations between hostile sides.

Secondly, though recent research has started to explore the Russia-Ukraine conflict from the angle of discourse analysis, most studies still rely on purely qualitative interpretive methods or purely quantitative corpus methods. The combination of systematic annotation protocols and qualitative contextual interpretation is still not well developed.

To fill these research gaps, this study carries out a comparative corpus-assisted analysis of proximization strategies in presidential speeches of Russia and Ukraine during the early stage of the 2022 conflict. It examines how the two leaders used proximization strategies at spatial, temporal, and axiological levels to construct their own competing legitimacy narratives. This study aims to deepen public understanding of Proximization Theory in the context of regional conflicts, and provide a new research approach by integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis.

3. Theoretical Foundation

Proximization Theory was first developed by Cap (2006) as an extension of Chilton's (2004) Discourse Space Theory. It conceptualizes discourse as a mental space organized around a deictic center (DC), which represents the speaker's own position. Within this space, entities fall into two groups: IDCs, which are located at the deictic center and linked to the speaker's values and interests; and ODCs, which sit at the periphery and are treated as potential threats. Proximization, then, is the process through which speakers portray ODCs as moving closer to the deictic center physically, temporally, and ideologically. This turns distant, abstract threats into immediate, concrete ones. The result is a sense of urgency that justifies taking preventive action against the perceived danger (Cap, 2013). This process works along three interconnected dimensions.

Spatial proximization involves a forced cognitive framing in which ODCs at the margins of the discourse space are depicted as physically advancing toward the IDCs at the center. Temporal proximization places the speaker's present moment at the core of the time axis. It brings together references to past events, current grounds, and future predictions in order to justify immediate action and prevent anticipated ODC activities. Axiological proximization is a coercive framing that portrays an intensifying ideological clash between ODCs and IDCs. This kind of confrontation may finally develop into actual physical conflict (Cap, 2013, pp. 108-122). The specific lexico-grammatical markers associated with each of these three dimensions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Lexio-Grammatical Items in the Proximization Framework (Cap, 2013)

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Spatial | S1. Noun phrases (NPs) construed as IDCs |
|----------------|--|

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Proximization | S2. NPs construed as ODCs |
| | S3. Noun phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs towards DC |
| | S4. VPs of action construed as markers of the impact of ODCs upon IDCs |
| | S5. NPs denoting abstract concepts construed as anticipations of the impact of ODCs upon IDCs |
| | S6. NPs denoting abstract concepts construed as effects of impact of ODCs upon IDCs |
| | T1. NPs involving indefinite descriptions construing ODCs' actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames |
| | T2. Discourse forms involving contrastive use of different tenses and aspects construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past/present instant |
| Temporal | T3. NPs involving nominalizations construing presupposition of conditions for |
| Proximization | ODCs' impact to arise anytime in the future |
| | T4. VPs involving modal auxiliaries construing conditions for ODCs' impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future |
| | T5. Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construal of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the now |
| | A1. NPs construed as IDCs' positive values or ideologies |
| Axiological | A2. NPs construed as ODCs' negative values or ideologies |
| Proximization | A3. Discourse forms involving linear arrangement of lexico-grammatical phrases construing materialization in the IDCs' space of the ODCs' negative ideologies |

4. Reach Design

4.1 Data Collection and Corpus Construction

This study examined the speeches delivered by Putin and Zelensky during the initial stage of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine from February 21 to March 18, 2022. This time period was chosen because it covered the most intense period of verbal confrontation, including Putin's televised speech announcing the "special military operation" and Zelensky's first wartime remarks to the Ukrainian public and the international community. The data was sourced from the government websites en.kremlin.ru and president.gov.ua, and the English translations were used as the basis for analysis. Although translation inevitably may cause certain deviations, to ensure readability and consistency, the official translations were given priority. The corpus consisted of 41 speeches, with Putin's speeches totaling 14,993 words and Zelensky's speeches 37,343 words. Despite the significant difference in length between the two, through frequency-based standardization processing (calculated per 1,000 words), comparability was ensured.

4.2 Analytical Procedure

The analysis was divided into three stages. Firstly, using UAM Corpus Tool (version 6.2), manual annotations were made for the proximization markers in the three dimensions, following Cap's (2013) classification scheme. Through multiple codings and verification, the reliability of the annotations was ensured. Secondly, the frequency counts were standardized and log-likelihood tests were used for statistical comparison to identify significant differences between the two corpora. Thirdly, through qualitative interpretive analysis, representative terms and examples were examined to reveal how specific language choices function within broader legitimation strategies. Combining quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative interpretive research enables both systematic pattern identification and detailed contextual interpretation.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Legitimation through Spatial Proximization

The application of spatial proximization in the speeches of Putin and Zelensky was statistically analyzed, with the results presented in Figure 1.

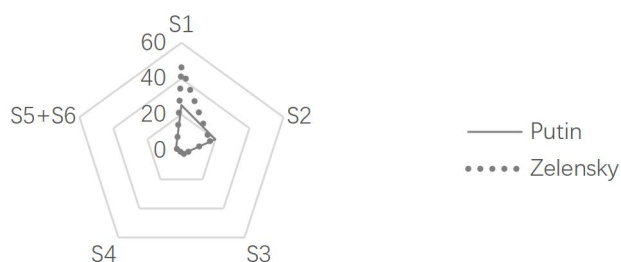


Figure 1. Spatial Proximization in Putin and Zelensky's Speeches

As illustrated in Figure 1, an overall pattern emerges: Ukrainian discourse exhibited significantly stronger spatial proximization features ($P < 0.05$). Specifically, the frequency of IDC nominal phrases (S1) was markedly higher in Zelensky's speeches than in Putin's. No substantial disparities were observed between the two sides in the usage of other linguistic resources. The concrete semantic orientation of spatial proximization requires context-dependent interpretation. Typical linguistic expressions from both sides, along with their frequencies, are presented and categorized based on contextual analysis in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Key Items of Spatial Proximization in Putin's Speeches

| Category | Key items | Frequency |
|--------------------------|--|-----------|
| 1. NPs construed as IDCs | [we/us]; [Russia/our country]; [our armed forces]; | 416 |

| | | |
|--|--|-----------|
| | [the Ukrainian people/our people/citizens of Russia] | (25.2%) |
| | [they]; [nationalists/radicals]; [Ukraine/Kyiv regime]; | 329 |
| 2. NPs construed as ODCs | [the West/external forces/the United States/NATO/ foreign military/Europe]; [colleagues/allies/partners] | (19.9%) |
| 3. VPs of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs towards DC | [move military infrastructure to/deploy assault weapon systems on]; [conduct surveillance over]; [expand NATO eastward]; [impose sanctions on]; [try/want/seek to threaten/destroy] | 34 (2.1%) |
| 4. VPs of action construed as markers of the impact of ODCs upon IDCs | [kidnap]; [deteriorate]; [have the most negative impact on]; [result in] | 4 (0.2%) |
| 5. NPs denoting abstract concepts construed as anticipations of the impact of ODCs upon IDCs | [threat/challenge/military presence]; [a possible worse peril]; [sanction attack/restrictions]; [confrontation/aggression against]; [NATO's expansion] | 41 (2.5%) |
| 6. NPs denoting abstract concepts construed as effects of the impact of ODCs upon IDCs | [killing]; [a big blow/humanitarian disaster] | 12 (0.7%) |

As shown in Table 2, the Russian government ranked as the core IDC in Putina's adoption of spatial proximization, with a normalized frequency of 25.2%. Other IDCs covered Russian citizens, military troops and Russian-speaking communities, particularly ethnic Russians residing in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian government and its western allies occupied the main Russia's ODCs. Putin applied naming strategies to categorize these countries and organizations via terms such as "colleagues", "allies" and "partners". These labels not only highlighted the close ties between Western nations and Ukraine, but also exposed their roles as financial backers and protectors standing behind Ukraine in the ongoing conflict.

Motion verb phrases in Putin's speeches mostly refer to NATO expansion, as shown in Example (1).

(1) The North Atlantic alliance **continued to expand** despite our protests and concerns. Its military machine is **moving** and, as I said, is **approaching** our very border. (Putin, 2022-02-24)

In Example (1), Putin highlighted how NATO's expansion and military deployment, driven by the ODC (the United States), posed a threat to Russia and undermined its core interests. This corresponded to abstract nouns including "aggression" and "humanitarian disaster" under S5 and S6. This language practice further highlighted the illegitimacy of the actions taken by ODCs and the significant risks involved, and demonstrated a preemptive justification strategy that positioned military actions as a necessary means to prevent future aggression, rather than a response to current acts of aggression.

Table 3. Key Items of Spatial Proximization in Zelensky's Speeches

| Category | Key items | Frequency |
|--|---|--------------|
| 1. NPs construed as IDCs | [we/us]; [our Ukraine/our country/our land/Kyiv]; [the armed forces of Ukraine/our troops/our military/our heroes]; [Ukrainians/our people]; [Europe/our partners and friends/NATO/the United States] | 1665 (46.3%) |
| 2. NPs construed as ODCs | [they]; [Russia/ Russian forces/Moscow/ Russian soldiers/Russian troops]; [the invaders/occupiers] | 605 (16.8%) |
| 3. VPs of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs towards DC | [advance/continue/head to/invade]; [target/aim at]; [commit/carry out military crimes against]; [want to damage/break/destroy/kill]; [attack/bomb/shoot at/shell/hit/fire at/strike at] | 86 (2.4%) |
| 4. VPs of action construed as markers of the impact of ODCs upon IDCs | [destroy/damage/kill/inflict damage on] | 32 (0.9%) |
| 5. NPs denoting abstract concepts construed as anticipations of the impact of ODCs upon IDCs | [threat/crisis] | 10 (0.3%) |
| 6. NPs denoting abstract concepts construed as effects of the impact of ODCs upon IDCs | [destruction/danger/loss/death] | 88 (2.4%) |

As shown in Table 3, Zelensky employed a large number of noun phrases as IDCs (S1), with a standardized frequency of 46.3%. The core of these IDCs was Ukraine and its government. Besides, Ukraine's allies were also included in the IDCs, particularly the United States, European countries, and NATO. Zelensky adopted a naming strategy and called his alliance as a "defensive alliance". This rhetorical device aimed to downplay the violent nature of his involvement in the conflict, and at the same time stress the legitimacy of his actions and statements.

On the other side, Russia and its government and military formed the core of ODCs, with a frequency of 16.8%. Zelensky used various naming strategies to portray Russia in a negative way. For example, words like "invaders", "occupiers" and "enemy" defined Russia as an invader. These labels presented Russia as an aggressor, which in turn provided a basis for international sanctions and exclusionary measures against it. Through this kind of naming, Zelensky built up an image of Russia as a cold-hearted perpetrator, while Ukraine was shown as innocent and vulnerable. This further strengthened the moral legitimacy of what he called the "defensive alliance."

Furthermore, Zelensky's language contained a large number of motion and directional verbs. These

words were mainly used to describe how the ODCs approached and threatened the IDCs, corresponding to the abstract nouns in S5 and S6, such as “crisis” and “threat”, with the emphasis mainly on military attacks and territorial occupation, which is reflected in example (2).

(2) Kharkiv and Kyiv are currently the most important targets for Russia. Terror is meant to break us. To break our resistance. They are **heading to** our capital, as well as to Kharkiv. (Zelensky, 2022-03-01) In this example, Zelensky highlighted the fact that ODCs were advancing toward the Ukrainian capital city of Melitopol. This immediately made the audience feel panic and concern for their safety. It also encouraged a nationwide mobilization, with people uniting to face the enemy together.

5.2 Legitimation through Temporal Proximization

The application of temporal proximization in the speeches of Putin and Zelensky was statistically analyzed, with the results presented in Figure 2.

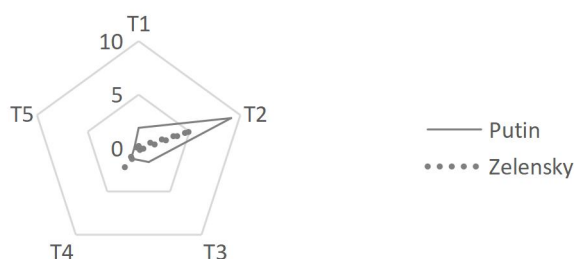


Figure 2. Temporal Proximization in Putin and Zelensky's Speeches

Overall, Putin used temporal proximization significantly more often than Zelensky did ($P < 0.05$). To be more specific, compared with Zelensky's speeches, Putin's speeches contained a much higher frequency of various tense structures and nominalization. On the other hand, Zelensky's discourse used present tense structures and modal verb phrases more often. These differences point to different temporal orientations. Putin tended to stress how past events were affecting the present situation. Zelensky, by contrast, focused more on what actions the international community should take right now. Typical linguistic expressions from both sides, along with their frequencies, are presented and categorized based on contextual analysis in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Key Items of Temporal Proximization in Putin's Speeches

| Category | Key items | Frequency |
|---|---|-----------|
| 1. NPs involving indefinite descriptions construing ODCs' actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames | [another/a direct/a very real/a permanent threat/challenge]; [a matter of time/a very short time]; [a strategic course/a clear anti-Russia policy/stance/a new package of sanctions and restrictions]; [a bloody military | 31 (1.9%) |

| | | |
|---|--|------------|
| | operation/a massive onslaught] | |
| 2. Discourse forms involving contrastive use of different tenses and aspects construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past/present instant | [...doing..., ...have done...]; [...have done ..., ...did...]; [...have done..., ...do...]; [...have done..., ...will do...]; [...have done..., ...doing...]; [...did..., ...have done...]; [...doing..., ...will do...]; [...did..., ...do...]; [...did..., ...doing...]; [...doing..., ...do...] | 150 (9.1%) |
| 3. NPs involving nominalizations construing presupposition of conditions for ODCs' impact to arise anytime in the future | [threat/risk/peril]; [NATO expansion]; [sanction] | 26 (1.6%) |
| 4. VPs involving modal auxiliaries construing conditions for ODCs' impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future | [may/will/would] | 20 (1.2%) |
| 5. Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construal of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the now | [The ruling Kyiv elites publicly <i>beach</i> the Minsk Package of Measures <i>to reach a peaceful settlement with regard to</i> Donbas. On the contrary, they are trying to orchestrate a blitzkrieg in Donbas as was the case in 2014 and 2015.]; [We made constant efforts to reach the agreements with United States and its allies on NATO expansion, but all were in vain with ignorance and lies.] | 7 (0.4%) |

Non-finite nominal phrases are used to express the uncertainty of events, which are understood to have the potential to occur or reappear at any time in the future, thereby influencing the audience's perception and judgment of the current affairs. The simple past tense and the present perfect tense are both used to describe actions that occurred in the past. Russian discourse did not view these past events as being confined to a fixed point in time, but rather framed them as ongoing influences that continuously act upon the current situation. Nominalization transforms dynamic processes into static entities and objective facts, and converts specific events into general abstract concepts, blurring the boundaries of time. As shown in Table 4, Putin extensively employed these linguistic techniques. By drawing on the temporal domain of the past, present and future, he normalized and naturalized the threats prevailing at present and future. Typical example is presented as follows:

(3) Many Ukrainian airfields **are located** not far from our borders. NATO's tactical aviation **deployed** there, including precision weapon carriers, **will be capable of striking at** our territory to the

depth of the Volgograd-Kazan-Samara-Astrakhan line. The deployment of reconnaissance radars on Ukrainian territory **will allow** NATO to tightly **control** Russia's airspace up to the Urals. (Putin, 22-02-21)

In his speech, Putin employed the sentence structure of “present progressing + present perfect + simple future” tense. The simple present tense in the first sentence introduced the current situation to the audience, namely that Russia was facing an increasingly severe threat from the Ukrainian airfields. The simple past tense indicated the known fact of the deployment of NATO's tactical aviation in the Ukrainian airfields. The simple future tense naturally depicted the threat brought about by the NATO and Ukraine mentioned earlier. This sentence structure presented the threat as a continuous evolving process from the past to the future, thereby giving the audience a sense of urgency and shaping Russia's decision to take military action as a legitimate defense policy. At the same time, the non-finite verb “to control” further strengthened the audience's cognitive schema of the threat posed by ODCs.

Table 5. Key Items of Temporal Proximization in Zelensky's Speeches

| Category | Key items | Frequency |
|---|--|------------|
| 1. NPs involving indefinite descriptions construing ODCs' actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames | [World War II] | 7 (0.2%) |
| 2. Discourse forms involving contrastive use of different tenses and aspects construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past/present instant | [...did..., ...doing...]; [...did..., ...have done...]; [...doing..., ...do...]; [...do..., ...will do...]; [...have done..., ...do...]; [...have done..., ...will do...]; | 175 (4.9%) |
| 3. NPs involving nominalizations construing presupposition of conditions for ODCs' impact to arise anytime in the future | [threat/crisis] | 6 (0.2%) |
| 4. VPs involving modal auxiliaries construing conditions for ODCs' impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future | [must/need/should] | 79 (2.2%) |
| 5. Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construal of | [They lied that they would not touch the civilian population. But since the first hours of the invasion, | 7 (0.2%) |

oppositional and privileged Russian troops have been hitting civilian infrastructure.];
 futures extending from the now [We received help from the democratic world, but the
 war does not end.];
 [Although we did everything necessary to make the
 humanitarian corridor work, Russian troops did not cease
 fire.];

As illustrated in Table 5, Zelensky's speeches featured a frequent employment of present tenses and modal verb phrases. Present tense structures serve to construct immediate events, while modal expressions construct directional meanings and probabilistic expectations within the future temporal domain, as is shown in Examples (4)-(5).

(4) But Russian tanks **are still shooting at** residential buildings in our cities. Armored vehicles **are still attacking**, including civilians. (Zelensky, 2022-02-25)

(5) The international community **must act** even more decisively...We **must fight against** the inhuman force that wants to destroy humanity itself. (Zelensky, 2022-03-07)

In example (4), Zelensky confined the context to the present progressive tense to describe the actions currently being taken by the Russian army against the Ukrainian people and infrastructure, emphasizing that the "atrocities" committed by the Russian army were recurring, undeniable facts and will persist in the future. This intensifies the harm caused by Russia to Ukraine and undermines the legitimacy of its military actions from a humanitarian perspective.

In Example (5), the underlined modal verbs served as an appeal by Zelensky to mobilize international support and boost the morale of Ukrainians against Russia. Such consistent use of modal verbs exhibited a somewhat didactic rhetorical feature. Under Ukraine's harsh wartime conditions, such linguistic choices served to persuade both domestic and international citizens.

5.2 Legitimation through Axiological Proximization

The application of temporal proximization in the speeches of Putin and Zelensky was statistically analyzed, with the results presented in Figure 3.

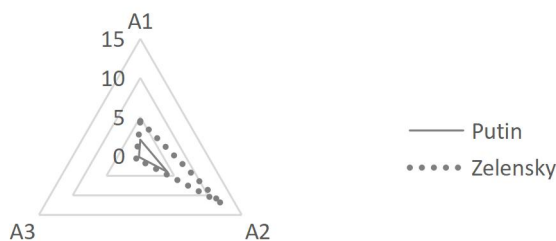


Figure 3. Axiological Proximization in Putin and Zelensky's Speeches

As reflected in Figure 3, Zelensky's speeches demonstrated a significantly stronger tendency toward axiological proximization ($P < 0.05$). Specifically, it adopted far more value-laden linguistic resources of positive IDCs (A1) and negative ODCs (A2) compared with Russian discourse. Substantial discrepancies were also identified in the axiological orientations adopted by the two parties. Tables 6 and 7 show the key items and frequencies of axiological proximization subcategories.

Table 6. Key Items of Axiological Proximization in Putin's Speeches

| Category | Key items | Frequency |
|--|--|-----------|
| 1. NPs construed as IDCs' positive values or ideologies | [responsibility/freedom/justice/independence]; [special military operation/self-defense] | 35 (2.1%) |
| 2. NPs construed as ODCs' negative values or ideologies | [corruption/aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism/lies and hypocrisy/aggressor/aggression] | 66 (4%) |
| 3. Discourse forms involving linear arrangement of lexico-grammatical phrases construing materialization in the IDCs' space of the ODCs' negative ideologies | [atrocity/global dominance/horror/genocide]; [cynical deception and lies]; [sought to destroy/gain a military foothold/contain Russia] | 8 (0.5%) |

As shown in Table 6, Putin attached great importance to historical legitimacy. He defended his position and action logic by establishing normative values based on history. However, he deconstructed the legitimacy of the discourse on Ukraine. Frequent historical expressions such as "independence" and "self-defense" indicate that Russia roots its behavioral logic in a historical cognitive framework, conveying a value judgment based on historical experience and oriented towards lessons. Moreover, Putin frequently used negative terms like "aggressive Russophobia" and "neo-Nazism" to describe the value system of Ukraine and its Western allies. This choice of words activated the audience's cognitive associations with the war atrocities committed by Nazi Germany during World War II. By linking the current practices of Ukraine and its Western allies with the past crimes of Nazi Germany, Russia constructed a fundamentally negative value orientation for its opposing camp. The "special military operation" was thus not only shaped as a geopolitical strategy, but also positioned as a moral crusade against the resurgence of Nazism.

Table 7. Key Items of Axiological Proximization in Zelensky's Speeches

| Category | Key items | Frequency |
|---------------------------|---|------------|
| 1. NPs construed as IDCs' | [independent country/democracy/peace/democratic | 161 (4.5%) |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|-------------|
| positive values or ideologies | world]; [patriotic war]; [human rights/humanity] | |
| 2. NPs construed as ODCs' | [evil/aggression/invasion/terror/crime]; | |
| negative values or ideologies | [occupiers/invaders/aggressor/terrorists] | 425 (11.8%) |
| 3. Discourse forms involving | | |
| linear arrangement of | [losses of our heroes/tragedy/death of people]; [under | |
| lexico-grammatical phrases | Russian attack/plan of invasion/ conscious destruction of | |
| construing materialization in the | people]; [wanted to block/used everything against us/ | 22 (0.6%) |
| IDCs' space of the ODCs' | trying to destroy] | |
| negative ideologies | | |

Under the guidance of the mainstream Western ideological framework, Zelensky frequently used nominal expressions such as “freedom”, “democracy”, “human rights”, and “humanity” to prove the moral legitimacy of his own value system. In contrast, when describing the ODCs (Russian side), he employed derogatory terms like “crime”, “invader”, and “terrorists”. This rhetorical technique systematically constructed a negative ideological image of Russia, portraying the country as one lacking democratic governance domestically, with an authoritarian system, and as a hegemonic power that implements terrorism and aggression internationally.

6. Conclusion

The comparative analysis shows that Putin and Zelensky used proximization strategies in quite different ways when trying to construct legitimacy. These differences reflect their different geopolitical positions and what they wanted to achieve through discourse.

Putin's speeches showed a “preemptive-defensive” legitimacy pattern. He mainly used temporal proximization and described possible spatial threats in the future. Through these methods, he explained Russia's military actions as necessary preventive measures against NATO's possible aggression. In the axiological aspect, he framed Russia's behavior as civilized resistance against Nazism. This statement gave a moral excuse for the Russia's geopolitical considerations. This pattern is similar to the “defensive-vindictive” rhetoric mentioned by Chiluva and Ruzait (2025), as it can provide justification for current military actions, and at the same time delegitimizing Western criticism through historical grievances.

Zelensky's discourse, on the other hand, showed a “victim-mobilization” pattern. He made heavy use of spatial proximization to focus on actual destruction that was already happening. He also created strong axiological polarization, setting up a contrast between Ukrainian democratic values and Russian evil. Through this, he built up an image of Ukraine as an innocent victim that needed international solidarity. His temporal focus was on the present tense, concentrating on suffering that was ongoing right now. This served immediate mobilization goals, rather than constructing a long-term threat. These findings are in line with what Tomczak and Goloshchuk (2024) examined about Zelensky's effective

deployment of personal authority and the legitimacy of role models.

These two different patterns reflect the asymmetric nature of the conflict. Putin, as the party that initiated military action, had to build justification for actions that many people might see as controversial. Zelensky, as the defending party, could rely on defensive legitimacy. His main task was to focus on mobilization and on building solidarity. This contrast helps demonstrate how proximization strategies fit the speaker's geopolitical stance and rhetorical needs.

This study proves that Proximization Theory is a very effective analytical framework for studying legitimacy in regional conflict discourse. The comparative analysis of Putin's and Zelensky's speeches shows that they have systematic differences in using spatial, temporal and axiological proximization strategies. These differences come from their different legitimacy goals: one is preemptive self-defense, and the other is victim-mobilization. These findings expand the application range of Proximization Theory from the analysis of inter-state conflicts to broader cross-cultural discourse analysis, and also reveal the cognitive-linguistic mechanisms behind war discourse. As geopolitical tensions still exist and may escalate, enhancing people's critical understanding of these rhetorical methods is increasingly important. It can play a positive role in promoting constructive civic participation and democratic deliberation.

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