

Original Paper

Grammatical Profiling and Responsibility Allocation in Wartime Discourse: A Critical Cognitive Analysis of Russian and Ukrainian Presidential Speeches in 2022

Yuanyuan Zhang¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Sanjiang University, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China

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Abstract

Wartime presidential speeches enable national leaders to frame conflict, divide group boundaries, and assign conflict responsibilities. Though lexical-rhetoric tactics are widely discussed, grammatical structures' cognitive-ideological functions in shaping agency and blame attribution remain insufficiently studied. This corpus-driven critical-cognitive study examines 41 early-phase 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict speeches by Putin and Zelensky (February 21-March 18, 2022). Based on the profile-base distinction in Langacker's Cognitive Grammar, it analyzes active, passive, and nominalized constructions across two corpora. Findings reveal that the two leaders adopt totally different grammatical strategies in their wartime discourse. Putin heavily uses ODC-led active constructions and IDC-subjected agentless passives to construct Russia as an external-threat victim. His use of nominalizations conceals Russian military agency so as to reframe military intervention as a defensive "operation" for legitimization. Zelensky uses grammatical structures in a more flexible way: actives realize accusation and domestic mobilization; passives assign blame and emphasize victim status; nominalizations encapsulate enemy atrocities while retaining Ukrainian agency via "defense" and "resistance". This study offers empirical evidence for grammatical choices' political-communicative value, indicating that grammatical profiling is a subtle but powerful ideological tool in wartime discourse.

Keywords

grammatical profiling, responsibility allocation, wartime discourse, cognitive grammar, critical discourse analysis, Russia-Ukraine conflict

1. Introduction

Armed conflicts in regional contexts bring about not only military confrontations but also fierce discursive competitions centered on moral legitimacy and responsibility attribution. Wartime public speeches delivered by national leaders function as core rhetorical carriers, which shape public understandings of conflict nature, draw clear dividing lines between in-group (IDC) and out-group (ODC), and gather wide support for domestic military and political decisions. Most audiences are able to notice obvious word choices and rhetorical tricks used to persuade them. However, subtle grammatical choices usually work unconsciously. As Hart (2013) pointed out, adjusting the prominence of actors and actions in grammar can implicitly guide audiences to judge moral rights and assign responsibilities in conflict events.

The full-scale military conflict between Russia and Ukraine that broke out in February 2022 provides a typical and practical case for studying such discourse mechanisms. Putin and Zelensky hold completely different views when narrating the origin, nature and core interests of this military conflict. Produced under huge domestic political pressure and widespread public anxiety over national security, these wartime speeches fit the definition of “ideological discourse” proposed by van Dijk (2008a: 42). This kind of discourse can shape and change public cognition through deliberate linguistic strategies, among which grammatical manipulation is a particularly important but easily overlooked method.

Current academic studies have analyzed multiple rhetorical features of official discourse concerning Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022. Existing researchers have summarized several key rhetorical strategies in this field. Their studies cover narrative framing methods (Sulzhytski *et al.*, 2024; Billah & Biswas, 2024; Breeze & Novoa-Jaso, 2025), metaphor applications (Kostusiak *et al.*, 2023), and ideological positioning (Cap, 2023). Despite these existing research achievements, most studies focus heavily on lexical selection and argumentation structure. Few have systematically explored the cognitive and ideological roles of grammatical structures in such discourse. In fact, different grammatical arrangements are subtle but powerful rhetorical tools in political communication. Common strategies include switching between active and passive voices, converting dynamic behavioral actions into static nominal forms, and selectively highlighting or hiding the responsible parties of certain behaviors. To fill this research gap, this study focuses on presidential speeches from Russia and Ukraine during the military conflict in 2022. It mainly investigates the practical functions of various grammatical structures in discourse, especially how these structures change and influence public responsibility attribution. This study addresses three specific research questions:

- (i) In their 2022 wartime speeches, how do Putin and Zelensky use active, passive and nominalized structures to construct the Russia-Ukraine conflict?
- (ii) What are the different frequency and distribution features of the three grammatical structures in the two leaders' speech discourses?
- (iii) How do their different grammatical application patterns help build opposite national conflict narratives, and further influence public judgment on conflict responsibility and military action

legitimacy?

2. Literature Review

Academic studies on political discourse have developed through multiple theoretical approaches over the years. Many pragmatic-focused researches explore how linguistic techniques help political groups justify military actions and build opposition identities. Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, researchers have adopted multiple analytical tools including Intertextuality Theory (Dunmire, 2009; Oddo, 2011), Legitimation Theory (van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008; Lin & Miao, 2016; Simonsen, 2019) and Social Cognition Theory (van Dijk, 2005, 2008b). These studies reveal how political elites construct favorable self-narratives while delegitimizing their opponents' behaviors through strategic linguistic design.

Critical Cognitive Linguistics (CCL) oriented conflict discourse research concentrates mainly on metaphorical framing and proximization strategies. Lakoff's (1992) landmark analysis of Gulf War discourse unveils how conceptual metaphors such as PERSON and COMPETITION build oppositional group identities and provide rhetorical justification for military intervention. Cap's (2006, 2013) Proximization Theory has been widely adopted in subsequent studies. Relevant research demonstrates how political leaders construct external threat perceptions to legitimize preemptive military actions (Dunmire, 2011; Zhang & Yang, 2019).

Most early political discourse researches focus heavily on lexical analysis. In recent years, however, more scholars have realized that syntactic structures also carry strong ideological meanings. Hart (2013) studied news reports on political protests and found that passive sentences are often used to background the actions of police while highlighting the behaviors of protesters, which directly affects readers' judgment of who should be blamed. Similarly, Fischer *et al.* (2017) analyzed parliamentary discourse and pointed out that nominalizations can turn controversial policy decisions into seemingly objective and unchangeable facts. These research results strongly prove that grammatical selection is a key cognitive and ideological tool to guide public attention and moral judgment in political events.

The link between grammatical profiling and political legitimation is especially obvious in wartime discourse research. Existing studies have shown that national leaders often adjust grammatical voice and structure to shape public opinions on military operations. In Dunmire's (2011) analysis of the Bush Doctrine discourse, the combination of temporal proximization and grammatical manipulation successfully frame preemptive military strikes as necessary self-defense behaviors. Høyer (2008) studied Tony Blair's speeches during the Iraq War and found that the frequent use of passive structures and nominalizations in Blair's speeches background the military actions of Britain and strengthens people's perception of external threats, which serves the government's political and military purposes.

Recent academic efforts have extended the above analytical frameworks to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict. Sulzhytski *et al.* (2024) adopted semantic network analysis to compare siege-related discourse on Russian and Ukrainian social media platforms, identifying four distinct narrative frames. Russian

media adopts bureaucratic and historical framing to depersonalize conflicts, while Ukrainian discourse emphasizes emotional experience, civilian victimhood and national solidarity. Billah and Biswas (2024) conducted a comparative analysis of mainstream news reports on key wartime incidents. Their study showed that TASS and Reuters use different frames to describe the conflict, strictly following their respective national positions, and both produce ideologically biased news content based on official information.

Other related studies supplement the research from different angles. Kostusiak *et al.* (2023) analyzed metaphor usage in Ukrainian wartime news and confirmed that various metaphors deliver negative and aggressive meanings to influence public cognition. Cap (2023) adopted conflict reality schemas to explain why Russia and Ukraine hold totally different legitimization logics in this conflict. Chilwa and Ruzaitė (2025) compared the rhetorical features of the two national leaders, though their research mainly focuses on lexical and thematic differences. Breeze and Novoa-Jaso (2025) further noted that different naming methods in international news related to Russian-Ukrainian war directly reflect different geopolitical standings. In addition, Paziuk *et al.* (2025) explained how wartime cognitive narratives take advantage of public psychological biases to reshape people's understanding of the conflict.

Although current studies have explored the discourse characteristics of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict in many aspects, there are still obvious research gaps waiting to be filled. To begin with, few studies conducted detailed grammatical analysis to explore how grammatical structures distribute responsibility in this conflict. Besides, most previous studies mainly took mass media discourses as their research samples, while presidential speeches, which can most directly reflect the official attitudes of the two countries, were rarely analyzed in depth. What's more, the majority of relevant studies depended too much on qualitative description, lacking solid quantitative data to support their findings. In order to fill these research gaps, this study adopts a corpus-based mixed research method. It combines quantitative statistical analysis with qualitative discourse interpretation to explore how Putin and Zelensky apply active, passive and nominalized constructions to allocate responsibility and construct legitimate conflict narratives.

3. Theoretical Foundation

3.1 Grammatical Constructions and Their Profiles

This study's theoretical framework is rooted in Langacker's (2008) Cognitive Grammar. This theory provides a reliable framework to understand how different syntactic choices produce special rhetorical effects in political discourse. A key concept proposed in this theory is the difference between conceptual base and semantic profile. The conceptual base means all the related meanings that a single linguistic expression can activate. In contrast, semantic profile refers to the specific part of the conceptual base that is highlighted and noticed by language users and audiences. Different sentences can describe the same event and share the same conceptual base, but different profiling choices will

lead audience to understand the event in completely different ways.

Such cognitive differences caused by profiling are very common at the grammatical level. Active, passive and nominalized structures are three different syntactic ways to describe the same behavior. Each of them creates a unique attention focus for audience. In wartime political speeches, leaders often change these grammatical forms on purpose to guide public attention, so that they can persuade the audience implicitly without obvious emotional expression. Several simple example sentences can clearly explain this syntactic profiling mechanism.

- a. The army attacked the city.
- b. The city was attacked by the army.
- c. The city was attacked.
- d. The attack began yesterday.

Sentence (a) is a typical active clause. It shows both the agent “the army” and the affected target “the city”. As the grammatical subject, the agent becomes the core focus of the whole sentence and gains the most attention. The patient acts as the object and only plays a secondary role in semantic expression.

Sentence (b) uses full passive voice and changes the original attention order. The patient moves to the subject position and becomes the main focus, while the agent is put in a subordinate by-phrase and loses its prominence. Sentence (c) is an agentless passive sentence, which further hides the actor. It only shows the negative experience of the patient, and the person who conducts the action is not mentioned so that audience can only guess the agent through context. This kind of grammatical omission greatly weakens the causal relationship between the actor and the behavior, making it hard for audiences to assign clear responsibility. In general, passive sentences with agents and agentless passive sentences have opposite rhetorical functions: the former keeps complete causal logic, while the latter removes explicit agent information.

Sentence (d) uses nominalization and reconfigures the event further. It turns the dynamic action of “attacking” into a static noun “attack” (Fairclough, 1992; Fowler *et al.*, 1979). This transformation removes the specific action executor and the time process of the behavior from the sentence. It is important to note that these grammatical choices are never neutral writing skills. Every structure can selectively guide public cognition, highlight favorable event interpretations and ignore unfavorable ones, so as to achieve hidden ideological and rhetorical purposes.

3.2 Grammatical Constructions in Wartime Discursive Practice

Based on the theoretical foundation outlined above, this study adopts the following analytical framework. Active constructions are identified as sentences whose grammatical subject is the agent or initiator of the action. These constructions are further divided into IDC-led constructions with in-group members as the action source and ODC-led constructions initiated by external out-group parties. Passive constructions are identified as sentences whose grammatical subject receive actions and bear behavioral results. These constructions are further classified according to whether the speaker intends to clarify the specific responsible party for conflict behaviors (through specified or deleted agent), or to

emphasize certain side's wartime sufferings (through IDC/ODC-subjected arrangement). Nominalized constructions are identified as expressions that convert dynamic behavioral processes into static noun phrases. These constructions are classified into three semantic types: nouns for IDC behaviors, ODC behaviors, and words that describe the overall state of the entire conflict.

Nevertheless, it is inappropriate to simply regard all grammatical choices as intentional ideological manipulation. Blindly attributing all syntactic usages to subjective political purposes will lead to oversimplified and one-sided research conclusions, which is not conducive to objective discourse analysis. As van Dijk (2008c) pointed out, passive and nominalized structures sometimes appear because of basic language expression rules, not deliberate rhetorical design. In some situations, the discourse focuses on action results and victim groups instead of action initiators. Besides, repeating the agent in every sentence will cause redundancy, so speakers often omit known agents in follow-up content. Therefore, any critical analysis of grammatical profiling must fully consider contextual cues, information status, and the broader co-text. This multi-angle analysis principle is followed throughout the whole annotation and research process of this study, which ensures the objectivity and credibility of the final research results.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data Collection and Corpus Establishment

The corpus of this study consists of public wartime speeches delivered by Russian President Putin and Ukrainian President Zelensky at the early stage of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict, from February 21 to March 18, 2022. All English speech transcripts were collected from official presidential websites *en.kremlin.ru* for Russian speeches and *president.gov.ua* for Ukrainian speeches. After screening out invalid and repeated texts, a total of 41 valid speeches were included in the research dataset.

A total of 41 speeches were identified and downloaded for analysis. Using the UAM Corpus Tool (version 6.2e), two corpora were established: a Russian corpus of 14,993 words and a Ukrainian corpus of 37,343 words. While the Ukrainian corpus is substantially larger in terms of word count, the analysis focuses on frequencies of relevant grammatical constructions computed per 1,000 words (‰), ensuring comparability between the two datasets.

4.2 Annotation and Analytical Procedure

Following the unified analytical standard mentioned in Section 3.2, this study manually annotates all active, passive and nominalized constructions in the two sub-corpora. For each active sentence, the annotator marks the group identity of the action agent (IDC or ODC). For passive sentences, two layers of coding information are recorded: the group of the patient subject and whether the agent is explicitly mentioned. For nominalized structures, this study classifies their semantic types (IDC action, ODC action, or overall conflict state), and records their syntactic functions and specific discourse context. Context-based annotation provides solid support for later qualitative analysis on how nominalization hides agent responsibility through reifying dynamic behaviors. To improve the reliability of coding

results, this study adopts double independent annotation. The author and a professional professor majoring in discourse analysis finish the annotation work separately. The inter-annotator consistency is calculated to reduce subjective coding errors and ensure data accuracy.

The whole research analysis includes three connected steps. First, the study calculates the normalized frequency of the three grammatical constructions to clarify their overall distribution in the two corpora. Second, it compares the distribution differences based on IDC and ODC classification, and uses chi-square tests to judge whether these differences have statistical significance. Third, typical examples are selected for in-depth qualitative discussion to explore the hidden ideological functions of different grammatical profiling strategies in specific wartime contexts.

5. Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows the frequency of active, passive and nominalized structures in the two corpora, which provides a general overview of how the two leaders apply different grammatical patterns in conflict discourse.

Table 1. Frequencies of Grammatical Constructions in Putin's and Zelensky's Speeches

Type	Putin's speeches	Zelensky's speeches	<i>p</i> -value
Active constructions	34 (2.1‰)	125 (3.5‰)	0.0062
Passive constructions	7 (0.4‰)	25 (0.7‰)	0.2430
Nominalized constructions	85 (5.2‰)	279 (7.8‰)	<0.001
Total	126 (7.6‰)	429 (11.9‰)	<0.001

Statistical results show that both leaders share a similar hierarchical order in grammatical use. In both corpora, nominalized constructions are the most frequently used grammatical form, which is far more common than active and passive ones. For Putin's speeches, nominalizations take up 69.3% of all annotated grammatical cases, with a normalized frequency of 5.2‰. By contrast, active constructions only account for 27.0% (2.1‰), and passive structures are the least used, occupying merely 3.7% (0.4‰). Zelensky's speeches follow the same distribution pattern but have a much higher overall frequency of all grammatical structures. In his discourse, nominalizations remain dominant at 65.1% (7.8‰), followed by active constructions at 29.1% (3.5‰) and passive constructions at 5.8% (0.7‰). Such a consistent hierarchy proves that both leaders prefer to use nominalized constructions when constructing wartime narratives.

Cross-corpus comparison clearly indicates that Zelensky adopts all three types of grammatical constructions more often than Putin. Statistical tests further prove that most of these gaps are statistically significant. The differences in active construction frequency ($p=0.0062$) and nominalization

density ($p < 0.001$) are not accidental, while the gap in passive construction use shows no significant statistical difference ($p = 0.2430$). The most obvious divergence lies in nominalized structures, as Zelensky's usage rate is nearly 1.5 times that of Putin. Although both leaders tend to turn dynamic wartime behaviors into static abstract concepts through nominalization, such different degrees of reliance on this syntax reflect their different rhetorical tendencies and narrative strategies.

5.1 Active Constructions and Agency Attribution

Active sentences naturally highlight their grammatical subjects as the initiators of behaviors, so they are the most direct syntactic tool to assign responsibility in political discourse. However, their ideological functions depend largely on the group identity of agents, namely whether the active subject belongs to the IDC or the ODC. As shown in Table 2, the two presidents have totally different distribution features of IDC-led and ODC-led active constructions.

Table 2. Distribution of IDC- and ODC-led Active Constructions

Type	Putin's speeches	Zelensky's speeches
IDC-led	2 (5.9%)	47 (37.6%)
ODC-led	32 (94.1%)	78 (62.4%)

Table 2 clearly shows a huge difference in how the two leaders assign behavioral responsibility through active sentence structures. In Putin's corpus, 94.1% of active sentences related to Russia-Ukraine conflict take ODC members as the grammatical subject. This consistent syntactic arrangement puts Russia in a passive position, making it the party that receives external threats and violent actions. Among 34 valid active cases, only two are led by Russia itself, which is an extremely imbalanced proportion. Such a huge difference in sentence subject selection helps shape a fixed viewpoint among the audience: Russia never takes the initiative to start conflicts, and all aggressive moves in this confrontation come from external forces. Therefore, Russia's military responses are reasonably interpreted as passive and self-defense behaviors. Another noticeable detail is that the small number of Russia-led active sentences in Putin's discourse do not describe Russia's offensive strikes. Instead, they mostly focus on Russia's protection of its overseas citizens and allied military forces. This subtle linguistic feature further unifies Putin's consistent defensive narrative and makes his public statement more coherent.

In contrast, Zelensky's use of active sentence structures is much more balanced, and they serve more complicated strategic goals in the conflict. ODC-led active sentences account for 62.4% of his total active cases. By placing Russia as the subject of violent military actions in active voice, Zelensky clearly attributes the whole conflict's responsibility and violent behaviors directly to Russia. Meanwhile, 37.6% of IDC-led active sentences also play a vital role in his overall discourse strategy. These sentences give Ukrainian military forces active behavioral agency, so Zelensky successfully

avoids presenting Ukraine as a totally helpless and passive victim. On the contrary, he builds a positive national image of Ukraine that actively resists foreign military invasion. The typical linguistic differences between Putin's and Zelensky's grammatical strategies can be clearly illustrated through the following representative speech examples.

(1) I must note that, encouraged by the United States and other Western countries, Ukraine was purposefully preparing for a scenario of force, a massacre and an ethnic cleansing in Donbass. A massive onslaught on Donbass and later Crimea was just a matter of time. However, our Armed Forces **have shattered** these plans. (Putin, 2022-03-16)

(2) The collective West **is trying to divide** our society using, to its own advantage, combat losses and the socioeconomic consequences of the sanctions, and **to provoke** civil unrest in Russia and use its fifth column in an attempt to achieve this goal. (Putin, 2022-03-16)

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

(4) He (Andriy Mykolayovych Kruhlov) withdrew the Buk SAM unit from the enemy attacks and personally **destroyed** two Russian helicopters and one plane. (Zelensky, 2022-02-28)

Example (1) shows one of the limited IDC-led active cases in Putin's speech corpus that describes Russia's military achievements. The active verb phrase "have shattered" clearly shows Russia's behavioral initiative and military strength, and it gives clear positive initiative to the IDC side. However, the persuasive effect of this IDC-led active cannot be separated from its sequential context. The previous sentences use ODC-focused descriptions to build a strong threatening atmosphere. They point out that Ukraine is actively making military plans and preparing for conflicts against Russia. Meanwhile, Western countries, including the United States, are secretly encouraging such hostile behaviors. With this pre-established threatening background, the present perfect tense "have shattered" becomes an obvious turning point in the whole narrative. It confirms that Ukraine's dangerous military plans are already set, and defines Russia's military actions as direct responses to these existing threats. This special sentence arrangement subtly changes audiences' judgement of the conflict. Instead of seeing Russia's moves as active military aggression, audience are more likely to regard them as necessary and effective defensive measures to eliminate incoming dangers.

Example (2) further reflects Putin's consistent preference for ODC-oriented discourse strategies. The present progressive structure "is trying to divide" and the infinitive "to provoke" assign subjective hostile intentions to Western military forces, while Russia is depicted as a passive victim that suffers from continuous external threats. The progressive tense suggests that Western hostility is not accidental or short-term, but systematic and long-lasting. This grammatical strategy provides solid rhetorical support for Putin to justify Russia's follow-up military countermeasures.

Different from Putin's threat-defense narrative, Zelensky's active sentences focus more on exposing ongoing Russian aggression and highlighting Ukraine's active resistance. In Example (3), the present progressive active phrases "are still shooting at" and "are still attacking" stress that Russia's violent

military behaviors are continuing in real time. These expressions create a strong sense of urgency for global audiences and clearly show that Russia's military attacks on ordinary Ukrainian civilians have never stopped. This method greatly helps Ukraine win international sympathy and public support from global society.

In Example (4), Zelensky mentions an ordinary Ukrainian soldier and uses simple but powerful active verbs such as “withdrew” and “destroyed”. This IDC-led expression creates a vivid and impressive image of brave and capable Ukrainian soldiers. Such personalized heroic stories make Ukraine's national resistance narrative more convincing and touching. To a certain degree, these positive descriptions also balance Russia's dominant discourse of powerful military strength, and effectively boost domestic wartime morale and national unity in Ukraine.

5.2 Passive Constructions and Patient Foregrounding

Unlike active sentences that emphasize the initiative of action initiators, passive constructions change the discourse focus to action receivers. Their rhetorical and ideological effects are mainly decided by two factors: the group identity of the highlighted patient (IDC or ODC), and whether the behavioral agent is kept or removed in the sentence structure. Table 3 clearly shows the detailed distribution of different passive types in the two speech corpora.

Table 3. Distribution of IDC- and ODC-subjected Passive Constructions

	Type	Putin's speeches	Zelensky's speeches
IDC-subjected	Agent-preserving	0	6 (24%)
	Agentless	7 (100%)	2 (8%)
ODC-subjected	Agent-preserving	0	0
	Agentless	0	17 (68%)

Putin's passive constructions present an extremely single-structured distribution. All seven passive clauses in his corpus belong to the IDC-subjected and agentless category. In these sentences, Russia and Russian civilians are consistently positioned as the affected patients, while the responsible behavioral agents are completely eliminated through syntactic omission. No passive structure in Putin's speeches retains explicit agent markers via by-phrases, nor does any clause foreground the sufferings of IDC. This unified pattern forms a fixed rhetorical model throughout his wartime discourse. Zelensky's passive constructions, by comparison, is highly diversified and strategically flexible. The largest proportion of his passive constructions (68%) are ODC-subjected and agentless, which take Russian military forces as implicit patients under defeated and attacked states. 24% are IDC-subjected and agent-preserving passives, which explicitly mark Russian forces as the perpetrators of Ukrainian civilian losses through complete syntactic structures. IDC-subjected agentless passives only account for 8% of his total passive usage, and no ODC-subjected agent-preserving passive instances appear in his

corpus at all. Such differentiated distribution fully serves his multi-dimensional rhetorical demands.

These statistical differences reveal essential structural asymmetry in the two leaders' passive discourse strategies. Putin's rigid passive syntax repeatedly highlights Russian national suffering while removing explicit agent accountability, shaping a stable narrative of Russia as an unjustly targeted party facing ambiguous external threats. Zelensky, however, flexibly switches passive structures according to rhetorical purposes: he uses agent-preserving passives to confirm Russian aggression and fix clear blame, and adopts agentless passives to amplify Ukrainian victimhood or demonstrate Ukrainian combat achievements. Typical discourse examples further elaborate these divergent mechanisms:

(5) Kiev was not just preparing for war, for aggression against Russia; it was conducting it. There were endless attempts to stage acts of subversion and organize a terrorist underground in Crimea. Hostilities in Donbass and the shelling of peaceful residential areas have continued all these years. Almost 14,000 civilians, including children **have been killed** over this time. (Putin, 2022-03-16)

(6) Kharkiv **is simply being destroyed** by (Russian) rocket artillery and air strikes. (Zelensky, 2022-03-04)

(7) Mariupol. Peaceful and hard-working city without any internal malice. **It was surrounded, blocked, and is being deliberately exhausted.** Deliberately tortured. The invaders deliberately cut off communication. Deliberately block the delivery of food, water supply. Turn off the electricity. (Zelensky, 2022-03-08)

(8) Lieutenant Colonel Oleksandr Valeriyovych Kapichun. Posthumously. Thanks to his heroic actions, the enemy column **was stopped**, equipment and enemy soldiers **were destroyed**. (Zelensky, 2022-03-03)

Example (5) clearly shows Putin's consistent discourse preference for IDC-focused and agentless passive structures. In this sentence, the specific party responsible for civilian deaths is completely removed from the clause. Many discourse studies have pointed out that deleting behavioral agents in neutral linguistic contexts is usually used to hide responsibility and weaken causal links (Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 1995). However, Putin's adoption of agentless passives in this conflict context is more complicated than simple responsibility obfuscation. This passive structure puts civilian casualties as the core focus of the sentence. Meanwhile, his repeated narratives that regard Kyiv as the initiator of Donbas violence in previous context provide sufficient contextual clues for audiences to judge the responsible party indirectly. In fact, this kind of agentless passive is a subtle rhetorical understatement. It makes the description sound objective and factual, while subtly guiding the audience to form fixed blame cognition, without Putin directly accusing any party.

On the contrary, Example (6) reflects Zelensky's different passive sentence strategy, which retains clear behavioral agents based on IDC perspectives. Unlike Putin's total erasure of agents, Zelensky uses a complete "by-passive" structure in this sentence which clearly lists Russian rocket artillery and air strikes as the direct causes of Kharkiv's destruction. This explicit presentation of behavioral agents leaves no ambiguity about conflict responsibility. It further strengthens the perception that Russia's

military actions are illegal and aggressive, and firmly anchors the blame on ODC.

Example (7) presents another unique passive usage adopted by Zelensky, which focuses on Ukraine's sufferings. A set of short passive sentences describe Mariupol as a city that has long endured continuous and intentional violent attacks, and none of these clauses mention specific behavioral agents. However, the sentences that follow directly name "the invaders" as the real perpetrators. This kind of staggered sentence arrangement produces a powerful rhetorical effect. Those agentless passive structures first highlight the severe damage and civilian losses in Mariupol, successfully arousing global audience's sympathy for victimized Ukrainian residents. The subsequent active sentences then supplement the missing agent information, completely placing the conflict blame on occupying forces. Different from Putin's agentless passives that obscure responsibility, Zelensky's usage does not avoid accountability at all. Instead, it first enlarges public perception of civilian victimization, and then achieves clear and firm condemnation against external aggressive behaviors.

Example (8) displays Zelensky's least common passive structure type, which takes external hostile forces as the victimized objects and adopts agentless expression. This sentence is used to commend a Ukrainian soldier's brave performance on the battlefield. The passive sentences that describe enemy casualties do not clearly state the initiator of those military actions. However, the opening phrase "thanks to his heroic actions" successfully connects all these battlefield victories to a specific Ukrainian lieutenant colonel. The use of agentless passive shifts the core focus of the whole narrative to Ukraine's effective resistance results. This will greatly motivate national morale and determination.

5.3 Nominalized Constructions and Event Reification

Nominalization turns dynamic and ongoing actions into stable, abstract noun concepts. As previous linguistic studies have pointed out, this kind of language processing removes the time features of events and clear agent information from sentences (Fairclough, 1992; Fowler *et al.*, 1979). Fluid behaviors are transformed into fixed conceptual objects, which can be freely evaluated, summarized and interpreted by speakers. Because of this feature, nominalization is widely used in political discourse. It allows national leaders to describe controversial military behaviors as objective facts, weaken or even erase the identity of action perpetrators, and reorganize causal logic of conflicts to fit their own ideological positions.

Following the unified coding standards mentioned in Section 4.2, this study classifies all nominalized structures in the two corpora according to their semantic meanings. All nominalized items are divided into three categories: behaviors initiated by the IDC, behaviors conducted by the ODC, and nouns that describe the overall conflict state. Table 4 shows the specific frequency distribution of the three nominalization types in the two leaders' speeches.

Table 4. Distribution of Nominalization Types in Putin's and Zelensky's Speeches

Type	Putin's speeches	Zelensky's speeches
IDC action	5 (0.3‰)	43 (1.2‰)
ODC action	72 (4.4‰)	103(2.9‰)
Conflict state	8 (0.5‰)	133 (3.7‰)
Total	85 (5.2‰)	279 (7.8‰)

The statistical data clearly shows that Zelensky uses nominalized structures much more frequently than Putin (7.8‰ versus 5.2‰). Apart from the overall frequency gap, the two leaders also show completely different distribution tendencies in the three semantic categories. Table 5 further lists typical nominalized words in the two corpora. These specific lexical examples can well explain the statistical differences and reflect the core rhetorical differences between Putin and Zelensky.

Table 5. Representative Nominalized Terms in Putin's and Zelensky's Speeches

Type	Putin's speeches	Zelensky's speeches
IDC action	in the support of Russia's citizens and the country's patriotic forces; the movement of Russian forces; the withdrawal of our troops (rare); the heroism of our soldiers	defense; counterattack; our resistance; support for our army; protection of our cities
ODC action	NATO expansion; aggression; shelling; containing and weakening Russia; the killing of civilians, the blockade, the abuse of people	Russia's invasion; Russian aggression; rocket bombing; air strikes; shelling; attacks; destruction; missile strikes
Conflict state	the special military operation; hostilities	the war; the situation in Ukraine

The lexical comparison in Table 5 reveals essential asymmetry in the two sides' nominalization strategies. The difference in ODC nominalization presents the two leaders' opposite discourse construction. Most of Putin's nominalizations describe external threatening factors, including NATO expansion, military blockade and Western aggression. These nominal expressions work together to build a discourse background that Russia is surrounded and threatened by hostile foreign forces. By contrast, most of Zelensky's nominalized words are used to generalize ODC military behaviors. Terms such as "invasion", "aggression", "bombing" and "shelling" turn all Russian military actions into fixed abstract concepts. This linguistic processing firmly frames the aggressive nature of ODC behaviors.

The difference in IDC nominalization further confirms the two leaders' opposite discourse logics. Putin's rare adoption of IDC-nominalized structures is a deliberate rhetorical strategy. If Russia's

military behaviors are solidified into fixed noun concepts, audiences will regard these actions as stable, observable and permanently judgeable behaviors. By keeping these military behaviors in dynamic verbal forms, Putin keeps the nature of these behaviors ambiguous, greatly reducing international accountability risks. In comparison, Zelensky's IDC nominalizations serve as building a positive national image. Nouns like "defense" and "resistance" turn Ukraine's temporary battlefield responses into enduring national bravery and unity. These nominalized expressions effectively strengthen his discourse of domestic mobilization and encourage ordinary citizens to unite against foreign invasion.

The most striking difference between the two corpora lies in the nominalization of overall conflict state. Zelensky frequently uses the single noun "war" to define the whole military conflict. This frames the ongoing clashes as an objective and undeniable fact. Such a definition fits mainstream humanitarian rules and helps Ukraine gain widespread moral support from the international community. In contrast, Putin completely avoids using the word "war" and consistently uses the official phrase "special military operation". This is far more than a simple lexical preference, and carries deep grammatical and ideological implications. The word "operation" is a neutral, technical and administrative term. It transforms large-scale violent military behaviors into planned, limited and procedural official actions. This nominal transformation removes the core attributes of a full-scale war, and covers up massive civilian casualties and serious humanitarian crises caused by the conflict. At the same time, it evades the strict legal definition of aggressive war and weakens public awareness of Russia's active initiative in launching military actions.

6. Conclusion

This study proves that grammatical profiling is an effective implicit ideological persuasion mechanism in wartime political discourse. Based on the self-built corpus of Putin's and Zelensky's early wartime speeches in 2022, this paper analyzes how three core grammatical structures (active, passive and nominalized constructions) redistribute behavioral agency and conflict responsibility. Different syntactic choices form unique discourse logics for the two leaders, which serve their respective political goals and help legitimate their country's military actions in the conflict.

Putin shows highly consistent and unified grammatical preferences in all three syntactic types. In active constructions, he rarely takes Russian forces as the action initiator. A large number of ODC-led active structures attribute all hostile behaviors to Ukraine and Western forces, which makes Russia's military countermeasures reasonable and necessary self-defense. All of his passive sentences are agentless and focus on the losses suffered by IDC. These sentence structures successfully highlight the civilian damage and national suffering that Russia has endured, while intentionally hiding which party is truly responsible for these conflicts. In terms of nominalization, Putin tends to adopt many nominalized words related to ODC forces to stress the continuous external threats facing Russia. At the same time, he deliberately refuses to nominalize Russia's own military actions on the battlefield. Moreover, he consistently uses the official phrase "special military operation" instead of the word "war", which

removes the aggressive nature of Russia's military campaign. All these unified grammatical arrangements work together to form a fixed discourse narrative: Russia is only a passive defender against external threats, rather than an active initiator of the conflict. These deliberate linguistic strategies effectively conceal Russia's strategic initiative in the whole confrontation and make its overseas military operations more reasonable and acceptable in public opinion.

In contrast, Zelensky's grammatical strategies are more flexible and dual-functional in rhetoric. His active structure system undertakes two major discourse tasks. ODC-led active structures clearly place violent and aggressive behaviors on Russia, building a clear logical foundation for international accusation. Meanwhile, IDC-led active sentences shape Ukrainian troops as active and effective defensive forces, instead of passive victims. His passive structures are also flexibly used according to different rhetorical needs. Agent-retaining passives precisely fix Russia's responsibility for military destruction, while agentless passives highlight Ukraine's civilian losses to arouse global empathy and support. Nominalization also plays a vital role in Zelensky's discourse system. He adopts various ODC nominalized terms to generalize Russia's military violence, forming fixed labels of aggression. The holistic nominalization of "war" upgrades partial military clashes to large-scale humanitarian crises with legal and moral weight, which strengthens Ukraine's victim identity. In addition, IDC nominalizations turn Ukraine's temporary battlefield resistance into fixed symbols of national heroism, inspiring domestic unity and wartime morale. Through flexible switching of different grammatical structures, Zelensky achieves multiple discourse goals including international accusation, global empathy acquisition and domestic public mobilization, while maintaining a unified core narrative of resisting Russian military invasion.

This study reveals that some common and seemingly neutral grammatical operations can subtly influence and change the public's moral judgment on international conflicts. Different linguistic choices made by national leaders can bring profound political influences, shaping both international views and domestic public opinion. These language strategies are often easily ignored, but their rhetorical and political effects are actually very significant. For future academic studies, researchers can expand the research scope to cover more forms of wartime discourse. Typical examples include official military briefings and various statements released on social media platforms. Moreover, follow-up studies can add more empirical analysis, so as to make the research results more convincing.

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