

Constructing legitimacy in conflict: Netanyahu's and Abbas's speeches at the 2015 UN General Assembly

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how international legitimacy is constructed through language in conflict settings by analyzing Netanyahu's and Abbas's speeches at the 2015 UN General Assembly. The study employs a mixed qualitative–quantitative design grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA), implemented using corpus-assisted methods. The speeches were processed and analyzed using AntConc, combining frequency, collocation, and concordance analysis with clause-level examination informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly transitivity, agency, and modality, to link linguistic patterns to broader discursive and socio-political meanings. The findings show that Netanyahu constructs legitimacy primarily through securitization, relying on threat lexicalization, frequent material-process verbs, animalistic metaphorical framing, and triadic structures to justify security-oriented positions. In contrast, Abbas focuses on juridification, drawing on high legal vocabulary, citing international law and UN resolutions, naming victims, using metaphor, and using rhetorical questioning to assert moral and legal legitimacy. The study demonstrates how corpus-assisted CDA can reveal systematic differences in legitimating strategies among political actors. It highlights how linguistic choices operate at both textual and socio-political levels to shape contested narratives of a conflict.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, Corpus-assisted CDA, Israel-Palestine, legitimacy, political discourse

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INTRODUCTION

The Israel–Palestine conflict is rooted in deep religious, historical, and territorial claims tied to identity and survival. Israel was established in 1948 as a Jewish homeland, while Palestinians, mostly Arab Muslims, see the land as their ancestral home and reject the legitimacy of the Israeli state. The conflict is also affected by internal religious, political, and belief divisions within both societies, obstructing efforts to resolve it. Its importance extends beyond its borders, involving regional rivalries and global powers, with external actors bringing their planning and moral interests into view. This ongoing struggle influences domestic stability and global geopolitics alike.

The impacts of the conflict extend beyond physical destruction; they are heavily shaped by discourse. Language serves as a weapon, justifying actions, shaping collective memory, and influencing international public opinion. At the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), symbolism and diplomacy shape political realities, with speeches serving as policy statements and rhetorical acts to mold perceptions, assign blame, and assert moral superiority. They condense complicated political struggles into carefully scripted moments, amalgamating historical references, moral arguments, and emotional appeals (Baker & McEnery, 2005; Holzschleiter, 2010).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a useful lens for analyzing these language-based performances, viewing language as a social practice that reflects and reproduces power. As Fairclough (2001, 2003) argues, discourse is never neutral and is a site where ideology is enacted and contested. Although CDA has been widely applied to

political discourse, its application to the Israel–Palestine conflict is limited. A few studies have examined populist rhetoric, comparisons among media outlets, and framing (Kandil, 2009; Olivas Osuna & Burton, 2024; Rababah & Hamdan, 2019). What appears to be missing is a systematic comparative study of how both Israeli and Palestinian leaders construct legitimacy within the same political and temporal context. This study attempts to fill that gap.

It aims to identify the dominant discursive strategies used by two leaders when framing the Israel–Palestine conflict and to examine the roles of vocabulary, grammar, and metaphors in constructing narratives of legitimacy. The dataset contains speeches by Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu at the 2015 UNGA. These speeches were selected for their political significance, as they took place shortly after the 2014 Gaza War and the Iran nuclear deal—events that heightened diplomatic tensions. Their timing, with speeches delivered just one day apart in the same venue, helps control for temporal and situational factors. This allows for a focused comparison between their ideological positions.

The key question is: How do Abbas and Netanyahu use language to legitimize their political positions?

Findings show that while both leaders seek international legitimization at the UN, Netanyahu constructs legitimacy through securitization, employing threat lexemes, animalistic metaphors, material processes, modality, and triadic structures. In contrast, Abbas constructs legitimacy through juridification, with a high frequency of legal vocabulary and intertextual appeals to international law, UN resolutions, institutions, victim-naming, metaphor, and rhetorical questions, thereby creating contrasting views on legitimate policy responses at the UN.

This study adds to CDA in three ways. It first improves existing theories of political legitimation by distinguishing two distinct but coexisting discursive strategies—securitization and juridification. It then demonstrates how these strategies operate through distinct patterns of lexical choice, transitivity, text structure, and metaphor in political speech. Moving beyond simple descriptions of linguistic features, the paper expands Fairclough's three-dimensional model by showing how specific textual choices are repeatedly used to create different forms of legitimacy within both discursive and socio-cultural practices. Methodologically, the study proposes a mixed-method CDA workflow that integrates quantitative corpus analysis with a theoretically guided close reading grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional model.

The findings broaden prior CDA research on political legitimation by showing that legitimacy is not a singular discursive realization but a differentiated process determined by institutional position, geopolitical asymmetry, and audience orientation.

The significance of this research lies in the language process it reveals, which reveals the power of political language. Speeches like these define who is entitled to speak, who is silenced, and what counts as legitimate suffering or justified action. Understanding this process matters because the stories told at the UN often circulate far beyond the hall itself, shaping media stories and influencing international policy debates. More broadly, it contributes to current debates about the rhetoric of war and peace, the performative nature of diplomacy, and the subtle ways in which discourse sustains or challenges hegemonic worldviews.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: Section two describes the method in detail; Section three analyzes and compares the two speeches; Section four concludes with the wider implications of the findings.

CDA and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies

CDA views language as inherently social, analyzing how texts express power and ideology. Its foundation combines multiple traditions: Fairclough (1992) describes CDA as the study of discourse practices and social structures; Van Dijk (2015) emphasizes that political discourse reproduces power and inequality. Wodak considers historical context and strategies like naming and argumentation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). All agree that language shapes and is shaped by social practices, connecting every utterance to power relations, group identities, and ideology.

CDA employs diverse methods, inviting critique. Critics warn that CDA may be biased, lack transparency, and be of limited validity if texts are selectively chosen. Breeze (2011) and Hammersley (1997) warn that normative stances might reinforce ideological biases, and Lee and Otsuji (2009) note that reflexivity can reinforce researchers' norms.

To improve rigor, corpus-assisted CDA or Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) has been developed. Corpus linguistics uses tools such as frequency and collocation statistics to address limitations, with keyword and collocation analyses revealing patterns in large datasets. CDA then critically interprets these patterns, linking them to social practices.

Scholars have shown that concordance lines reveal semantic prosody and concept valuation (Caldas-Coulthard, 1993; Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard, 1996; Louw, 1993). Baker (2023) introduced frequency lists, keyword analysis, and collocation networks to trace ideological framing. Baker and Levon (2015) noted that

corpus and qualitative analyses often yield similar insights, with corpora offering broader data and enabling triangulation. Concordance lines allow analysts to observe the development of contextual meaning, linking quantitative patterns with nuanced interpretation.

Legitimation in Discourse

Legitimation is the discursive process of justifying social actions to make them acceptable or necessary to an audience. As I. Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) note, it is a key function of political discourse.

Van Leeuwen (2007) sees legitimation as the explanation of why an action is proper by linking it to existing values. It relates to ideology, revealing assumptions about social norms. As speakers seek to answer the audience's question, "Why should we do this?" to gain consent and legitimize goals within a normative order (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 93). He outlines four main discursive legitimation strategies: authorization, which appeals to authority like laws, institutions, or expert opinion; moral evaluation, which uses shared ethics and evaluative language such as good or bad; rationalization, which provides reasons or goals, including utilitarian justifications and statistical support; and mythopoesis, which employs storytelling through myths, anecdotes, or analogies to justify actions by showing historical or heroic precedents.

These strategies are common in CDA studies of political discourse. For instance, Simonsen (2019) found that Israeli political communication during multiple wars against Hamas relied on two main legitimation strategies: moral abstraction, which frames war with morally charged terms like "self-defense" to avoid negative words like "war" or "attack" and to depict military actions as ethically necessary; and instrumental rationalization, which justifies war as a rational means to achieve goals like "protecting civilians."

Chilton (2004) sees legitimation as central to political conflict, in contrast to delegitimation, which discredits opponents. These strategies often merge with other rhetorical devices, such as van Dijk's (1998) 'us versus them' polarization that moralizes: portraying the in-group as virtuous and the out-group as morally questionable. Debates question the clarity of these categories, highlighting their broadness and overlap, which requires flexible application. Some argue that multiple strategies may be used simultaneously in a single utterance. Despite this, van Leeuwen's taxonomy remains a useful starting point for coding texts.

Corpus linguistics identifies patterns of legitimation in large datasets, such as how leaders reference authorities or values. Hansson and Page (2022) used corpus techniques to analyze government Twitter accounts, finding frequent appeals to experts and rules under "authorization" and "rationalization." These methods complement close analysis by revealing systematic collocations of moral terms and narrative markers, helping identify the most common strategies across various speech types.

Materials and Methods

Data and Materials

The dataset consists of two political speeches delivered at the 2015 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA): one by Benjamin Netanyahu and one by Mahmoud Abbas. The speeches were selected because of their comparable communicative contexts. They were delivered at the same international forum, within a one-day interval, and addressed similar global audiences, thus enabling a controlled comparison of legitimation strategies under similar discursive conditions.

The primary data source is the official United Nations English-language transcripts. Abbas's speech is based on the UN's official English translation of the Arabic version. The corpus comprises 3,310 words (922 unique tokens) for Abbas and 3,811 words (1,147 unique tokens) for Netanyahu's speech.

All texts were converted into plain text (.txt) format for corpus analysis. Preprocessing involved removing non-linguistic metadata (e.g., headers, timestamps), standardizing punctuation, and normalizing formatting. No lexical content was altered.

Analytical Framework

This study adopts a mixed qualitative–quantitative approach grounded in Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse (text, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice) (N. Fairclough, 1992). The model is operationalized through a six-phase, corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) workflow.

To enhance linguistic precision at the textual level, elements of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) are incorporated, particularly transitivity analysis. At the interpretive level, Van Leeuwen's legitimization framework (2007) is applied to identify discursive strategies of justification.

Corpus Processing and Quantitative Analysis

Corpus analysis was conducted using AntConc (version 4.3.1). Following preprocessing, each speech was treated as a separate corpus file.

Token frequencies were calculated and normalized per 10,000 words to ensure comparability across texts of unequal length. High-frequency lexical items were identified based on relative frequency thresholds (top-ranked items after exclusion of function words).

Collocation analysis was performed using a ± 5 -word window. Statistical association was evaluated using frequency-based measures available within AntConc. Key-word-in-context (KWIC) concordances were generated for high-frequency and semantically salient items to examine usage patterns in context.

These procedures produced a set of recurrent lexical patterns that guided subsequent qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Linguistic Analysis

The qualitative phase focused on clause-level analysis informed by SFL. Clauses were segmented manually based on grammatical boundaries. Verbal processes were identified and coded according to transitivity categories (material, relational, mental, verbal, behavioral, existential), agency (actor assignment), voice (active/passive), and modality.

Clause-level coding was conducted using a predefined

analytical schema developed from SFL literature. To ensure reliability, 20% of the data set ($n = 112$ clauses) was randomly selected and independently double-coded. Intercode agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa, yielding $\kappa = 0.86$, indicating almost perfect agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and refinement.

Discursive Practice Analysis

At the level of discursive practice, the analysis examined thematic organization, intertextuality, and argumentative structuring.

Texts were segmented into paragraph units, which served as the primary unit of thematic coding. Each paragraph was assigned to one of six predefined thematic categories: conflict, peace, security, law, identity, and victimhood. These categories were developed deductively based on CDA literature and the research objectives.

A detailed codebook specifying definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and disambiguation rules was developed to ensure consistency in thematic coding and to minimize overlap between conceptually adjacent categories. A subset of 20% of the paragraphs ($n = 65$) was randomly selected for double coding. Intercode reliability yielded Cohen's $\kappa = 0.79$. Coding disagreements were resolved through iterative discussion, resulting in minor refinements to the codebook. Concordance patterns and thematic distributions were then analyzed to identify recurring discursive strategies and framing mechanisms.

Socio-Cultural Interpretation

At the socio-cultural level, findings from the corpus, grammatical, and thematic analyses were integrated and interpreted within a Critical Discourse Analysis framework. Particular attention was given to ideological construction and legitimization strategies. Van Leeuwen's model (2007) of legitimization was applied to identify forms of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoiesis. These categories were implemented through indicators identified in the textual and discursive analyses.

The multi-level integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a systematic interpretation of how legitimacy is constructed.

Analytical Workflow and Replicability

The study followed a six-phase iterative workflow (see Figure 1):

1. Corpus preparation and preprocessing;
2. Frequency, collocation, and concordance analysis;
3. Clause-level grammatical coding;
4. Thematic segmentation and discursive analysis;
5. Integration of linguistic and thematic findings;
6. Application of the legitimization framework.

The six-phase iterative workflow based on Fairclough's 3D model

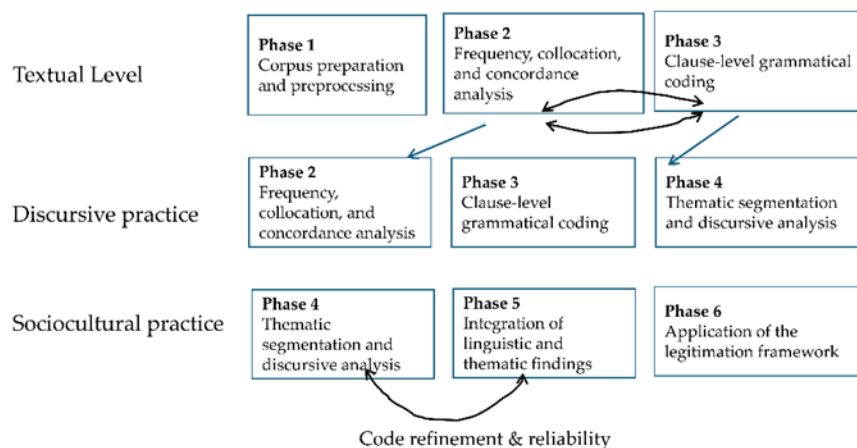


Figure 1. The six-phase iterative workflow is based on Fairclough's 3D model.

Quantitative outputs informed qualitative interpretation at each stage. Iterative cross-checking ensured consistency across analytical levels. The cleaned corpus, coding schema, and analytical protocol are available in the Supplementary Materials to facilitate replication and reuse.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on publicly available political speeches and does not involve human participants, personal data, or confidential materials. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

Results and Discussion

Securitization in Netanyahu's discourse

Threat lexemes

Corpus-assisted analysis reveals that threat-related terms like Iran (67), nuclear (16), and terror (11) are densely clustered throughout the speech. These lexemes rarely appear neutrally; instead, they are embedded in evaluative frames that ascribe danger and intentionality to Iran, as seen in bigrams such as "Iran's aggression," "Iran's terror," and "Iran threatened."

Iran is consistently positioned as the Actor in material processes that imply agency and hostile intent. For example, in "Iran aided Hamas and Islamic Jihad..." and "Iran supplied Hezbollah..." Iran is foregrounded as the initiator of action, reinforcing the image of an escalating threat.

In contrast, Israel clusters are significantly associated with stability, resolve, and moral agency. Patterns like "Israel is" (11) and "Israel will" (9), "Israel stands," "Israel remains...", and "Israel respects" present Israel as principled and ethical, aligning with van Dijk's ideological square (1998) of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

Grammatically, Iran is repeatedly cast as the Actor in material processes, while Israel or the region is the Patient/Goal threatened by harm. The narrative sequence moves from attributing capability (having missiles) to demonstrating past actions (aided, sent, supplied), building an inferential chain that justifies preventive action. The progression of material predicates, such as "Iran boosted its

supply... Iran sent more soldiers... Iran sent thousands... Iran did all this... Iran also shipped tons... Iran threatened to..., accumulates fact-like assertions towards a normative conclusion.

This sequence is central to securitizing discourse; it identifies a threat and justifies an extraordinary response by turning various incidents into clear indicators of imminent danger, thereby supporting coercive measures.

Metaphor

Metaphorical expressions occur frequently in relation to Iran, and this technique intensifies securitization. These include predatory and animalistic terms such as "rapacious tiger," "sharper claws," "unleashed," "unmuzzled," and "devouring prey," which dehumanize Iran, attributing instinctual aggression and stripping the actor of moral and political rationality, making negotiation implausible. These metaphors co-occur with references to Iran's nuclear program and regional activities.

Pairing the "rapacious tiger" with the "kitten" introduces moral polarity, suggesting that Iran's apparent moderation, such as cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), masks an existential threat. This predator-versus-prey framing turns perceived danger into a crisis and morally justifies pre-emptive containment. He is replacing a political actor with a single, negative identity. Following Van Leeuwen (2007), the metaphor serves as a moral evaluation tool, constructing a charged adversary whose identity is shaped by deception and threat. This prioritizes emotional responses and triggers emergency protocols, making exceptional security measures appear more credible.

Material processes

Clause-level analysis highlights this moral dichotomy through role allocation. Material processes (131 instances) dominate Netanyahu's speeches, which are focused on action and intervention (see Figure 2). When describing Iran, he consistently casts Iran as the Actor in material processes involving hostile intent linked to military and geopolitical actions.

Lexical patterns show repeated verb-noun combinations including "smuggled missiles," "supplied Hezbollah," and "sent soldiers," which link Iran and affiliated groups with

military activities across different regions.

Meanwhile, Israel is embedded in reactive, defensive material process roles such as “to respond forcefully” or “to defend itself against destruction.” This role allocation positions Iran as the instigator of violence and Israel as a

compelled, responsive agent, naturalizing the logic of security-driven intervention and legitimizing coercive action, as necessary.

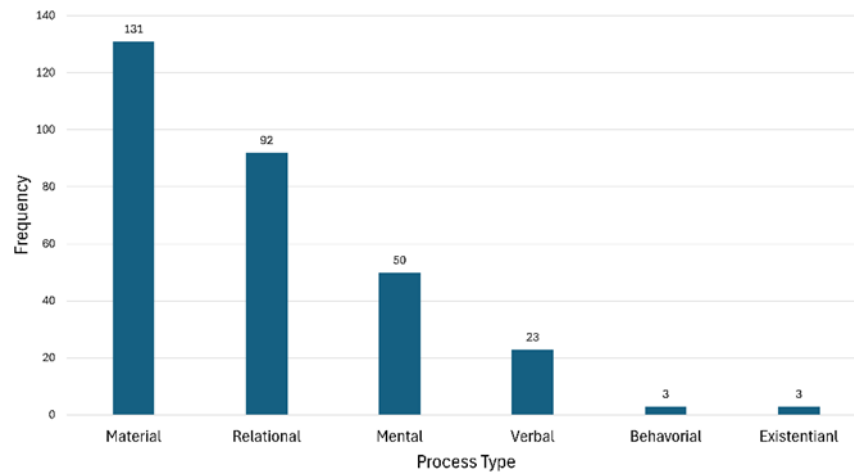


FIGURE 2. SFL process types in Netanyahu's speech.

Although material processes dominate, relational processes (92 instances) help define identity and moral position. Attributing legitimacy, responsibility, and resolve to Israel, such as in “... Israel remains committed to achieving peace with the Palestinians...” Mental processes (50) foreground Israel's rationality and vigilance, while hostile intentions are assigned to external actors. Verbal processes (23) reinforce authority through warnings and declarations. Lexical chaining consolidates the narrative of transnational threat. Verb-noun pairings like “smuggled SA-22 missiles,” “supplied Hezbollah with surface-to-surface missiles,” and “set up terror cells in Kuwait, Jordan, and Cyprus” create evidential chains linking military capability, terrorism, and expansion. Iran and proxies are consistently cast as Agents acting on weaponized Patients. The result is a construction of Iran and its allies as unified, purposive threats with military, ideological, and transnational reach. These chains draw on established security discourses, importing meanings from military and intelligence contexts into diplomatic language—Netanyahu aligns Israel's actions with international security concerns, activating familiar threat schemas that reduce interpretive effort. Rather than making direct arguments, the speech relies on pre-encoded frames of danger and response, allowing meaning to be inferred.

This discursive pattern reflects van Leeuwen's mythopoiesis legitimation, establishing legitimacy through morally charged narrative structures. The speech simplifies the struggle to archetypes of predator/protector or hero/villain stories, making coercive actions appear necessary and morally justified.

Modality and text structure

High-certainty epistemic modality dominates Netanyahu's speech. Frequent occurrences of will (predictive) (32), imperative phrasing (“Make sure that...” (3), and modal markers of obligation “should” (7), “must” (2) create a pattern of warning combined with prescriptive pressure on the Assembly, such as examples below.

“...no one should question Israel's determination to defend

itself...”

“The Palestinians should not walk away from peace.”

This modal grammar turns description into obligation. It projects outcomes as necessary and his demands as morally obligatory. Speech-act theory clarifies that modal and imperative forms serve as acts of authorization, enabling the speaker to prescribe. For example, “Make sure that the inspectors actually inspect,” “Make sure that the snapback sanctions actually snap back,” shift the force of statements from assertion to directive. In turn, this is central to securitizing speech, where language itself legitimates emergency measures.

Three features make the modality effective in Netanyahu's speech: future projection “will” frames policy as inevitable; deontic and imperative forms turn recommendations into duties for other actors; and also the first-person singular (I = 38) and triadic sequencing (“First..., Second..., Third...”) build a commanding ethos. He uses a problem-solution argumentation, identifying Iranian aggression as the problem and advocating for sanctions and international cooperation as the solutions. Such patterns reinforce speaker authority and limit contestation.

Juridification in Abbas's discourse

Legal vocabulary

Abbas's discourse heavily uses legal and institutional terms, such as law (10), resolution (11), occupation (12), rights (11), two-state solution (8), United Nations (12), General Assembly (5), International Criminal Court, and European Union. These terms are not neutral; they anchor his arguments within the structure of global governance and ground Palestinian claims in international norms.

This is evident in his references to formal legal rules and institutions, such as in “I further recall General Assembly resolution 67/19 of 2012 ...”, “... Those who fear international law and international courts must cease committing all crimes...”, “... must also call again on the Security Council and the General Assembly...”

Such utterances use legal entities as authorities and present

them as established realities. Legality is framed as a preexisting condition, not a matter of debate, naturalizing juridical authority and depicting injustice as an already recognized condition within the international order.

Verbal constructions like "must cease" combine institutional address with strong deontic modality. The obligation in "must" is linked to legal mandates, shifting agency from the speaker to impersonal structures such as law, courts, and resolutions, and shifting legitimacy to institutional validation.

From a legitimation perspective, this format falls under the categories of authorization and rationalization in van Leeuwen's (2007) taxonomy. Abbas uses legal sources as epistemic guarantees, transforming political grievances into legal claims. Harms are reframed as violations recognized by the UN, narrowing the discourse from political disagreement to legal non-compliance.

Victim-naming

Abbas systematically names Palestinian victims while framing Israel/Israeli (17/22) as the Actor in violations against those victims. This allocation of agency creates a framework of accountability and reinforces responsibility. For example, he references a child victim: "...They burned alive and killed the Palestinian child, Mohammed Abu Khdeir..." "...while the killers remain free and have not yet been arrested..." These clauses use the active voice, explicitly assigning agency and making the causal chain between the perpetrator and the harm transparent. Unlike passive constructions, this foregrounds direct accountability. Using proper names transforms abstract casualties into recognizable individuals, intensifying moral salience and linking to established human-rights narratives, especially regarding child victims, a key concern in international law.

Victim-naming serves as a juridical legitimation: the victim becomes a concrete case of a broad harm. This supports justice and responsibility—if identifiable civilians, especially children, are harmed, then institutional intervention and legal accountability are warranted.

By focusing on specific subjects and actions, Abbas's speech aligns Palestinian claims with the evidence-based logic of humanitarian law, where accountability is tied to demonstrable acts; inaction by institutions risks contradicting their own principles, such as human rights and justice.

Rhetorical questions

Abbas repeatedly uses rhetorical questions like "Is it not time...?" (5 times) to prompt institutional accountability. Examples include:

"Is it not time to end this injustice?"

"Is it not time to stop this suffering?"

These questions, though not information-seeking, serve as normative prompts for the international community, especially the UN. The predicates presuppose ongoing injustice and suffering, framing inaction as morally problematic.

Repetition creates rhetorical pressure, narrowing acceptable responses and encouraging endorsement of the implied judgment. As such, disagreement becomes unwelcome. Although they lack explicit deontic markers like "must" or "should," their pragmatic impact is strong. They serve as interpellative tools that turn the audience into morally and institutionally involved agents.

The addressees' legitimacy is implied: failing to act risks contradicting the UN's core principles, justice, human rights, and civilian protection. This strategy aligns with van Leeuwen's moral evaluation legitimation strategy. It

reinforces his emphasis on juridification, framing Palestinian grievances as requiring an institutional response and, in turn, appealing to procedural pressure.

Metaphor

Abbas's use of "cancer" to describe Israeli settlements, attributed to former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, serves as both a metaphorical and intertextual device.

The metaphor "...Yitzhak Rabin... described the Israeli settlements ... as 'cancer'" maps disease onto settlements. It creates a link between DISEASE and POLITICAL PRACTICE, invoking the cognitive schemata of contagion and framing settlements as structurally illegitimate.

Attributing the metaphor to Rabin uses an Israeli voice to validate a Palestinian critique, enhancing credibility and making condemnation harder to dismiss as partisan.

The metaphors' moral evaluation and authorization legitimation techniques increase evaluative force and legitimacy. These techniques function strategically within the juridification strategy, framing settlements as incompatible with the normative and international legal orders.

Intertextuality

By using intertextuality, both leaders frame collective trauma as a moral basis for legitimacy.

Intertextual references show how political speech is connected to wider social, historical, and institutional stories (N. Fairclough, 1992, 2003). Texts borrow familiar stories and authoritative references to persuade (Kristeva, 2024). Abbas emphasizes legal terms such as UN resolutions, the Geneva Conventions, the Oslo Accords, and the Rome Statute, as well as authorities such as the ICC, to present the Palestinian claim in terms of rights and to promote recognition of a Palestinian state.

He also invokes religious references, such as Isra' and Mi'raj and Palestinian nuns' canonization, to add moral weight and sacred legitimacy, blending legal and religious genres to expand audience solidarity.

Netanyahu leverages Jewish trauma, notably the Holocaust and pogroms, as a core narrative of existential threat. He links ancient enemies (Babylon, Rome) to modern foes such as Iran and its proxies. This creates a continuous story of persecution to depict Israel as both historically significant and morally justified, perpetually vulnerable, and necessitating defensive actions.

He invokes biblical figures like David and Solomon and populist elements (like Yogi Berra's remark about déjà vu at the UN) to portray Israel as an ancient, righteous victim of international bias. The narrative is emotionally compelling and strategically effective, particularly in Western contexts where Holocaust memory and antisemitism hold significant power. However, it creates what Butler calls selective hierarchies of grief, the idea that not all lives are equally mourned in global discourse (Butler, 2009). Such narratives show victimhood extends beyond the powerless, allowing powerful states to portray themselves as victims, blurring oppressor-victim binaries and obscuring power structures.

Omission

Omissions in political speech are powerful tools. Choosing what to emphasize or omit shapes what we see as normal "common sense."

By omitting certain topics, each speaker advances a view that protects their own position. For example, Netanyahu rarely addresses settlement expansion or occupation policies, both of which are central to critiques of Israeli policy. Instead, he highlights threats from Iran and Islamist groups to portray Israel as a defender. Abbas, meanwhile,

omits internal Palestinian division, such as tensions between Fatah and Hamas, political fragmentation, or controversial forms of armed resistance. Abbas constructs an image of Palestinians as politically unified and committed to international law. He stresses Palestinian suffering but does not fully engage with Israeli security anxieties; the conflict is framed mainly as colonization and injustice.

Discursive battles are struggles over perceptions of reality (N. Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1980). What is left unsaid influences legitimacy and our understanding of reality. So, in both cases, what is not said shapes what seems real. That absence helps one side avoid appearing accountable. Omissions in international discourse shape social reality by masking alternative views and, in turn, influence how audiences interpret the issues.

Conclusion

This study shows that political legitimacy at the UN is built through leaders' use of language.

Netanyahu presents Israel as a rational actor defending itself from existential threats, using the language of security. Abbas, on the other hand, uses a juridification strategy to frame Palestinian claims in terms of international law. Methodologically, this study combines Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis with corpus methods to connect close reading with broader language patterns. The results show that strategies such as securitization, juridification, intertextuality, and omission are used by speakers to gain legitimacy in diplomatic settings.

In practical terms, the study urges politicians and international organizations to pay close attention to how their words can shape global opinions and even reinforce conflicts, sometimes even at the UN, where peace is the goal. Being more aware of how stories about threat and victimhood are created and spread could help policymakers respond more thoughtfully.

For future research, it would help to expand the corpus both diachronically and across genres, incorporate media recontextualization, and examine audience reception to better understand how such narratives circulate and alter across contexts.

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Data Availability Statement: The source transcripts are publicly accessible via the United Nations digital archive <https://gadebate.un.org/en/sessions-archive>

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