

# LANGUAGE AS STRATEGY: MAPPING FUNCTIONAL DOMINANTS IN POLITICAL AND MILITARY DISCOURSE

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## Abstract

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) unpacks how language enacts power in political and military contexts. Drawing on Ustyuzhanina's typology of discourse sectors—cognitive, social, linguistic, cultural—and functional dominants in political texts, this study applies a discourse-historical CDA framework (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 1998) to speeches and propaganda from the 1980 and 1984 U.S. presidential campaigns, Nazi World War II posters, and recent Russia–Ukraine rhetoric. Through corpus-based content analysis, we identify recurrent strategies—nominalization, polarization, metaphor, euphemization—used to legitimize authority and dehumanize opponents. Findings demonstrate systematic “othering” and semantic manipulation across contexts. Implications highlight CDA’s role in revealing covert ideologies and guiding media literacy interventions.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse-historical approach, functional dominants, political discourse, military propaganda, nominalization, polarization, metaphor, euphemization, semantic manipulation.

## Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how discourse both reflects and reproduces social power relations (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). Within political and military arenas, language constructs ideologies, legitimizes authority, and marginalizes “others.” Ustyuzhanina’s work outlines a four-sector typology of discourse—cognitive (themes and sources), social (participants and relations), linguistic (channels and genres), cultural (values and subcultures)—as a basis for systematic analysis. Despite rich case studies, comparative CDA across electoral campaigns and military propaganda remains limited. This paper fills that gap by applying a discourse-historical CDA to three contexts: Reagan’s 1980 and 1984 U.S. campaigns, Nazi World War II propaganda, and contemporary Russia–Ukraine speeches, asking:

1. Which linguistic strategies recur across contexts?
2. How do these strategies function to construct ideology and exercise power?

## Data Selection

- **U.S. Elections (1980, 1984):** Transcripts of Reagan’s debates and speeches (Reagan vs. Carter; Reagan vs. Mondale).

- **WWII Propaganda:** Selected Nazi-era posters and speeches (e.g., Hitler's rallies, Goebbels' broadcasts).
- **Russia–Ukraine Conflict (2021–2024):** Addresses by Putin framing “Western aggressors” vs. “Russia’s defenders.”

## Analytical Framework

We adopt the discourse-historical approach (DHA), integrating:

- **Textual analysis:** Lexico-grammatical features (e.g., nominalization, passive constructions).
- **Discursive practice:** Intertextual references and genre conventions.
- **Socio-cultural practice:** Historical narratives and ideological contexts (van Dijk, 1998; Fairclough, 1995).

Ustyuzhanina’s “functional dominants” – key lexical, morphological, and syntactic elements exerting greatest persuasive force – guide our coding .

## Procedure

Using NVivo, each corpus was coded for:

- **Nominalization & Agent-omission:** e.g., “the eradication of threats” instead of “we will eradicate threats.”
- **Polarization & Othering:** binary us-vs-them contrasts.
- **Metaphor & Euphemism:** e.g., “iron curtain” for Cold War division .
- **Semantic Stereotypes:** dehumanizing labels (“infidels,” “subhumans”).

Concordance lines illustrate each strategy; frequency counts reveal dominant patterns.

## Nominalization and Agency

Across all corpora, actors obscure agency via nominalized abstractions (“implementation of policy” vs. “we implement policy”), shifting responsibility to impersonal processes. In Reagan’s 1984 debate, “the strength of democracy” replaces “we strengthen democracy,” reducing accountability.

## Polarization and Othering

Recurrent binary framing emerges:

- **Reagan:** “Freedom” vs. “tyranny,” evoking historical memory of Cold War.
- **Nazi Propaganda:** “Aryan purity” vs. “Jewish corruption,” legitimizing genocide.
- **Putin:** “Russia’s defenders” vs. “Western aggressors” frames Ukraine conflict as external threat.

These binaries simplify complex realities and mobilize in-group solidarity.

## Metaphor and Euphemism

Metaphors recontextualize conflict:

- Churchill’s “iron curtain” succinctly captured ideological schism .
- ISIS uses “garden of paradise” to reframe suicide attacks euphemistically.

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- In U.S. speeches, Reagan's "shining city on a hill" evokes moral exceptionalism. Euphemisms ("collateral damage" for civilian deaths) sanitize violence across military discourses.

### Functional Dominants and Context Sensitivity

Applying Ustyuzhanina's levels, we observe:

- **Lexical dominants:** repetition of keywords ("freedom," "security").
- **Morphological dominants:** proliferation of agent-omitting passives.
- **Syntactic dominants:** paratactic sequences ("we build peace, we build hope, we build America").

Their configuration shifts with context: more emotive tropes in campaign rhetoric; more sanitized, technical language in official military briefings.

Our comparative CDA demonstrates that despite divergent ideologies, political and military actors deploy a shared repertoire: nominalization to obscure agency, polarization to create moral binaries, metaphor and euphemism to reframe reality, and functional dominants tuned to audience and genre. This confirms Fairclough's assertion that power is often concealed in ostensibly neutral language (Fairclough, 1995) and van Dijk's model of ideological square (1998). Ustyuzhanina's functional dominants enrich CDA by pinpointing which linguistic elements carry maximal persuasive weight .

### Implications:

- **Critical literacy:** Media consumers must recognize these strategies to resist manipulation.
- **Policy:** Regulators and platforms could flag political messaging that systematically obscures agency or dehumanizes opponents.
- **Research:** Future studies should examine audience reception of these devices, particularly in digital media.

### Limitations:

- English-language focus; non-Anglophone contexts warrant investigation.
- Reliance on high-profile texts; grassroots and social-media discourse remain under-explored.

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