

Constructing or Disrupting Peace through Language: A Peace Linguistics Analysis of the Trump-Zelensky Diplomatic Discourse

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Abstract

This study examined how the communicative styles of President Donald Trump and President Volodymyr Zelensky influenced the construction or disruption of peace in their February 28, 2025 Oval Office meeting. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis and anchored in Friedrich's peace linguistics and Cohen's intercultural diplomacy framework, this probed into differences of the two leaders' communicative styles and what cross-cultural challenges arise from these differences. It analyzed how these styles and challenges contribute to the construction or disruption of peace in their discourse and ultimately analyzed the role of language in conflict resolution. The findings reveal that Zelensky commonly used a high-context, formal, and relational style in his discourse, marked by affiliative politeness, inclusive pronouns, mitigation, dignified-restoring resistance, and appeals to norms and shared values. In contrast, Trump's discourse was characterized by a low-context, informal, and dominance-oriented style as exemplified by his use of gambling metaphor, evaluative language, transactional framing, interactional control, self-promotion, and adversarial discourse. These differing codes often created tension that undermined trust and cooperation in the meeting. Zelensky's language, which cultivates empathy and shared responsibility, conforms to peace-linguistic principles while Trump's language, which often underscores hierarchy and personal credit, often disrupted these efforts. This shows that language is central to diplomatic conflict resolution. It proves how language can either build trust and mutual recognition that peace requires, or reinforce competition and mistrust. This study affirms the need for conscious, culturally-sensitive, and peace-oriented language in high-stakes diplomatic communication.

Keywords: *Communicative styles. critical discourse analysis. diplomatic discourse. Peace linguistics.*

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Language, Culture, and Peace in Diplomatic Discourse

Language is central in diplomacy and international relations. Political leaders use it as the primary medium in negotiating interest, in persuading counterparts, and in building relationships. Bjola and Kornprobst (2018) stressed that the factors necessary in effective diplomatic communication are efficient exchange of information and strategic and culturally-sensitive use of language. This is congruent with Johnson and Hall's (2005) assertion that communication breakdowns often caused by linguistic ambiguities, cultural misunderstandings, or conflicting discourse conventions, can heighten tensions and worse, spark conflict between states. To reduce such risks, peace linguistics has emerged to examine how language can be purposely used to promote peace and prevent conflict. de Matos (2005) defined peace linguistics as the study and promotion of the "use of language to achieve peace and avoid verbal or physical aggression." Friedrich (2007, 2012) expanded this view by highlighting the ethical responsibility of speakers to make deferential and inclusive linguistic choices in communication. This implies that the use of conscious and peace-oriented language becomes essential for political leaders in fostering understanding and avoiding conflict.

Diplomatic discourse is inherently shaped by cross-cultural communication dynamics, with leaders operating within culturally embedded communicative styles. This influences how messages are framed, interpreted, and evaluated. Relevant to this is Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context cultures. High-context cultures are characterized by implicit, indirect, and context-dependent communication while low-context cultures are characterized by explicit, direct, and message-centered exchanges (Hall, 1976). Another is Hofstede's (2010) cultural dimensions which underscores differences in power distance and hierarchy, shaping expectations regarding formality, politeness strategies, and turn-taking in diplomatic interactions. This suggests that when interlocutors approach discourse with contrasting cultural norms, e.g. one favoring blunt directness and the other privileging deference and subtlety, misalignments can occur that can break relationships. Research on diplomatic negotiations has shown that successful high-stakes interactions often center on the ability to navigate such stylistic divergences, with misaligned communicative patterns linked to misunderstandings, perceived disrespect, or loss of trust (Cohen, 1997; Gulliver, 1979). Kurbalija (2013) also found that sensitivity to cultural variation and the strategic accommodation of differing styles promotes rapport and enhance cooperation in international diplomacy. Thus, understanding cultural communicative preferences is critical for mitigating potential tensions and promoting constructive engagement between political leaders.

Following the cross-cultural communicative challenges that shape diplomatic interaction, the February 28, 2025 Oval Office meeting of President Zelensky and President Trump offers a rich, real-life instance where cultural, political, and linguistic tensions converge publicly (Atlantic Council, 2025; AP News, 2025). This encounter was motivated in part by a proposed framework mineral resources deal, which was to grant the U.S. access to Ukraine's rare-earth and other strategic minerals, and was to be negotiated alongside assurances of continued U.S. support amid Ukraine's ongoing conflict following Russia's 2022 invasion (Atlantic Council, 2025; CNN, 2025). President Zelensky sought binding security guarantees and argued that mere promises would not be enough given Russia's past violations (CNN, 2025). On the U.S. side, President Trump and Vice President Vance asserted the need for expressions of gratitude from Kyiv. In addition, they appeared to press for a ceasefire component, even when solid security guarantees were not yet formalized (AP News, 2025; TIME, 2025). Combining these, tension rose during the meeting, ending it abruptly without the mineral deal signed after Trump accused Zelenskyy of being "disrespectful" and canceled a joint news conference (AP News, 2025; The Washington Post, 2025). This underscores the intensity of diplomatic stakes.

What makes this case particularly significant for peace linguistics is that it allows for the analysis of face-to-face discourse under high stakes between leaders of culturally and politically distinct nations. Ukraine is recovering from intense conflict and is heavily dependent on foreign aid while the United States has its own diplomatic traditions, rhetorical strategies, and media visibility. The themes of peace, alliance, negotiation, and moral obligation are all present in the meeting, not merely as abstract concepts but as explicit points of contention (AP News, 2025; TIME, 2025). Given Friedrich's emphasis on how linguistic choices reflect ethical responsibilities and can either build or erode peace (Friedrich, 2007; 2012), this meeting provides a fertile ground for investigating how communicative style, tone, framing, etc. serve to construct or disrupt peace in international diplomacy.

While the meeting offers a rare and revealing glimpse into high-stakes diplomatic discourse, it also exposes a broader gap in existing scholarship, i.e., real-time diplomatic conversations have seldom been examined through the lens of peace linguistics. Much of the existing literature on diplomacy and language has focused on negotiation strategies (Cohen, 1997), rhetorical framing (Charteris-Black, 2011), and cultural competence in international communication (Hofstede, 2010; Kurbalija, 2013). However, very few studies have explicitly analyzed how the linguistic choices and communicative styles of political leaders can actively construct peace, a core concern of peace linguistics (Friedrich, 2007, 2012; Gomes de Matos, 2005). Peace linguistics (Friedrich, 2012) aims to uncover how language can either reduce or worsen tensions. Yet its application is largely limited to interpersonal and educational contexts. Little is known about its application in high-level diplomatic communication. This limitation is significant because diplomacy is not only a political process but also a communicative one. The success or failure of peace-building efforts often centers on how messages are framed, interpreted, and responded to. Examining then the communicative styles and cross-cultural challenges that surfaced in the Trump-Zelensky discourse may show how specific linguistic choices can facilitate or deter the pursuit of peace. In doing so, it contributes to bridging the gap between theoretical work in peace linguistics and the practical realities of international diplomacy.

To address this gap, a focused inquiry into how language operates within real diplomatic exchanges, not merely as a vehicle of policy but as a force that can build or disrupt peace, must be conducted. Accordingly, this study is conducted to examine the intersection of

communicative style, cultural dynamics, and peace-building potential. It aims to answer three interrelated research questions: 1) How do Trump and Zelensky differ in their communicative styles, and what cross-cultural challenges arise from these differences during their Oval Office meeting?; 2) In what ways do these communicative styles and cross-cultural challenges contribute to the construction or disruption of peace in their diplomatic discourse?; and, 3) What do these findings reveal about the role of language in facilitating or hindering conflict resolution in international diplomacy? Through these questions, the study will be able to show how linguistic choices can shape the course of high-stakes diplomatic interaction and the pursuit of peace.

Diplomatic Discourse Through the Lens of Peace Linguistics

To address the research questions of this study, Friedrich's theory of peace linguistics is utilized as its theoretical foregrounding. According to Friedrich (2007, 2012, 2016), peace linguistics studies how language can be consciously used to promote peace, reduce conflict, and cultivate mutual understanding. It challenges the notion of language as a neutral conduit and instead frames it as a powerful tool capable of either constructing or disrupting peace. It further emphasizes the ethical responsibility of speakers as active agents who can consciously choose linguistic forms that reduce hostility, mitigate misunderstandings, and build rapport. Central to it are the intentional use of language for peace, respect for linguistic and cultural diversity, and constructive engagement with conflict through dialogue rather than confrontation. By foregrounding empathy, tolerance, and intercultural sensitivity, this framework highlights how communication practices carry social and political consequences.

Framing this study from peace linguistics directly addresses its first two research objectives. Zelensky's formal, deferential, and high-context style contradicts Trump's informal, assertive, and low-context manner. This great contrast between the two state leaders' communicative styles may produce misaligned politeness expectations, differing turn-taking norms, and potential misinterpretations. Friedrich's emphasis on intercultural sensitivity frames these tensions not as personal flaws but as culturally-patterned behaviors that require adjustment. This view also shows how specific discursive choices can either strengthen or strain rapport, revealing how these styles contribute to either the construction or disruption of peace in discourse.

Friedrich's framework also enables this study to address its third objective. Peace linguistics explicitly links micro-level linguistic behavior to macro-level peace outcomes by asserting that diplomats bear ethical responsibility for the peace-building or conflict-escalating potential of their words (Friedrich, 2007, 2016). This positions language as an active force in shaping diplomatic outcomes, rather than a passive vehicle of content. By integrating cross-cultural pragmatics with normative peace goals, peace linguistics is an appropriate lens for this research to reveal how linguistic choices are not just communicative acts but strategic interventions that can either advance or obstruct peace in international relations.

Communicative Styles, Cross-Cultural Challenges and Peace in Diplomatic Discourse

Communicative styles are the culturally-patterned ways individuals use language, pragmatics, and interactional norms to build relationships and negotiate meaning (Tannen, 1984). It is central to diplomacy, where language not only conveys policy content but also

performs political identities and manages relationships (Chilton, 2004; Kampf, 2013). When leaders from divergent cultural traditions meet, their implicit communicative “rules” can misalign and may produce misunderstanding. Cohen (1997) underscores that successful diplomacy requires sensitivity to such cultural communication norms as mismatches can impede cooperation and erode trust. Friedrich’s (2007, 2016) also notes that peace linguistics frames language as an ethical tool that can either escalate or de-escalate conflict. These perspectives converge in showing how communicative style is not just a cultural feature but a determinant of whether diplomatic interactions construct or disrupt peace, a tension illustrated in the communicative contrast between Trump and Zelensky.

Zelensky’s style shows high-context formality blended with affiliative performativity, shaped by both post-Soviet discourse norms and his entertainment background. Wang (2019) underscores that post-Soviet political communication tends to favor scripted delivery, hierarchical politeness, and avoidance of overt confrontation. Zelensky often draws on these norms, through gratitude expressions, inclusive pronouns, and careful turn-taking to signal deference and solidarity (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2022; Yermolenko, 2022). His career as a comedian before becoming the President of Ukraine cultivated populist performativity and the use of strategic humor to humanize politics and build emotional rapport (Kaminskij, 2022). Research shows that this can function as a form of public diplomacy by framing messages in emotionally resonant, memorable ways to capture public attention and mobilize support (Chernobrov, 2022). During the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Zelensky’s emotionally charged sound bites and direct digital appeals exemplified this approach, which consequently galvanized international sympathy (Serafin, 2022; Lange-Ionatamishvili & Svetoka, 2015). These strategies exemplify Friedrich’s (2016) view that peace-promoting discourse emphasizes empathy, relationality, and face-sensitive alignment. They are also congruent with Cohen’s (1997) principle that showing deference to an interlocutor’s cultural expectations facilitates trust-building. With these, Zelensky’s style can carry a peace-constructive potential.

In contrast, Trump embodies a low-context, dominance-oriented style that is rooted in American individualist norms and is amplified by his idiosyncratic political persona. American political discourse typically values directness, informality, and self-assertion (Hall & Hall, 1990; Wodak, 2015), but Trump accentuates these traits through hyperbole, improvisation, and self-reference (Ott & Dickinson, 2019; Mercieca, 2020). Albert and Raymond (2019) observe that even Trump’s greeting rituals are orchestrated as performances of dominance in the “middle region” of public political life. Reyes and Ross (2021) further show how he imports informal conversational features into formal discourse to project spontaneity and control. Afanasyev et al. (2021) demonstrate that Trump’s emotionally-charged rhetoric, particularly his tweets on Russia, had measurable market impacts. Tan and Cienki (2024) add that his use of metaphors in negotiations often reinforced adversarial stances over time, prioritizing performance over mutual accommodation. Such behaviors exemplify what Hansson (2024) terms coercive impoliteness or the strategic face-attacking used to deflect criticism and assert control. From Friedrich’s (2016) perspective, this style is peace-disruptive: it privileges self-enhancement and confrontation over mutual understanding. From Cohen’s (1997) perspective, it exemplifies how low-context assertiveness can appear disrespectful to high-context interlocutors expecting deference and turn-taking.

These clashing styles create cross-cultural misalignments that can destabilize peace-oriented diplomacy. Zelensky’s high-context approach expects reciprocity in formality and

politeness while Trump's low-context approach normalizes conversational competition. Hall (1976) helps explain how such mismatches produce misread intentions and interactional friction. Lü (2018) shows that when contrasting codes collide, even subtle violations of expected politeness can escalate tension. Moreover, Dorison and Minson (2022) find that conflict counterparts often overestimate each other's sense of self-threat, which heightens defensiveness and obstructs constructive dialogue. Trump's dominance displays and coercive impoliteness may risk threatening Zelensky's positive face while Zelensky's deferential tone may be perceived by Trump as weakness rather than respect. These dynamics can be viewed as not personal incompatibilities but culturally-patterned contrasts in communicative expectations which is the kind of unconscious language use that Friedrich (2016) warns can undermine peace. Cohen (1997) likewise emphasizes that ignoring these cultural codes can breed mistrust, whereas adjusting to them is essential for building cooperative intent.

Using peace linguistics to view the two leaders' discourse makes it visible how these communicative choices serve as micro-level mechanisms that either build or erode peace. This underscores the central claim of peace linguistics that language is an active force with ethical stakes, capable of either constructing or obstructing peace in international diplomacy. It is therefore crucial to understand how these stylistic divergences operate to explain the peace-building or peace-disrupting dynamics of the Trump-Zelensky Oval Office interaction.

Critical Discourse Analytic Approach to Examining Peace in Diplomacy

This study used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how the communicative styles of Trump and Zelensky during their Oval Office meeting contributed to the construction or disruption of peace within their diplomatic discourse. CDA, as developed by Fairclough (1992, 1995), van Dijk (1997, 2001), and Wodak (2001), conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice through which power, ideology, and cultural norms are enacted and contested. This direction is congruent with the study's aim to reveal not only the stylistic contrasts between the two leaders but also the sociocultural dynamics and ethical implications of their linguistic choices. To anchor this interpretive work, the analysis integrates Friedrich's (2007, 2016) peace linguistics and Cohen's (1997) intercultural diplomacy framework as complementary lenses. While peace linguistics foregrounds the ethical responsibility of communicators to make conscious linguistic choices that reduce hostility and foster empathy, Cohen's framework emphasizes the need to align discourse with interlocutors' culturally-patterned communication norms to build trust and prevent friction. This integral approach ensures that the analysis captures how their discursive strategies functioned as potential mechanisms for either peace-building or peace-disruption.

The primary data consist of a verbatim transcript of the February 28 Oval Office meeting, which provides naturally occurring interactional language produced under the high-stakes conditions of diplomatic performance. The transcript includes all verbal utterances and salient paralinguistic markers (e.g., pauses, interruptions), and it is contextualized by concurrent media reports and prior scholarly analyses of each leader's communication style (Kaminskij, 2022; Mercieca, 2020; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2022). This multimodal contextualization enables a richer interpretation while maintaining the transcript as the central unit of analysis. The analytic process followed Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, proceeding through cycles of textual, discursive, and social practice analysis. At the textual level, the transcript was coded for interactional features that constitute communicative style, including turn-taking patterns, politeness strategies, evaluative language, mitigation and intensification, and metaphor use (van Dijk, 1997, 2001). At the discursive practice level,

these features were interpreted through Cohen's (1997) intercultural framework to identify how they reflected culturally-grounded communication codes such as Zelensky's use of gratitude and formality aligning with post-Soviet high-context norms (Wang, 2019) and Trump's interruptions and self-promotional hyperbole reflecting low-context, dominance-oriented U.S. political discourse (Ott & Dickinson, 2019; Albert & Raymond, 2019). This phase assessed how cultural misalignments generated interactional friction or misunderstanding (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019).

At the social practice level, the analysis applied Friedrich's (2007, 2016) peace linguistics to evaluate the peace-building or peace-disrupting functions of these communicative strategies. Utterances were coded as peace-constructive when they displayed features fostering empathy, face-saving, or cooperative framing and as peace-disruptive when they involved self-glorification, coercive impoliteness, or competitive dominance moves likely to escalate tension (Hansson, 2024). Coding memos documented how each discursive move shaped rapport, affective tone, and the perceived relational atmosphere of the meeting. This iterative coding process was reflexive and theory-driven, with categories continually refined to remain grounded in the data while anchored in the conceptual criteria drawn from peace linguistics and intercultural diplomacy.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were implemented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was achieved by consulting multiple data sources (the transcript, media coverage, and scholarly profiles of each leader's rhetorical style) to avoid overreliance on isolated textual cues. Adequate description was employed to present excerpts with detailed contextual commentary, enabling readers to evaluate the plausibility of the interpretations. Reflexivity was practiced through analytic memos that documented interpretive decisions, helping to mitigate researcher bias. Theoretical triangulation was also applied by integrating two complementary frameworks, peace linguistics and intercultural diplomacy, to strengthen interpretive validity. The study used only publicly available discourse from public figures, and thus did not require institutional ethics approval (British Sociological Association [BSA], 2017). Nevertheless, ethical safeguards were upheld by accurately representing the discourse, attributing all materials to their sources and avoiding decontextualized or misleading interpretations. In line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) principles, care was taken to ensure that all evaluative claims about the peace-building or peace-disrupting potential of the discourse were grounded in textual evidence and contextualized within each leader's cultural and political background.

Contrasting Communicative Styles and Challenges in Diplomatic Discourse: The Case of Trump and Zelensky's Oval Office Meeting

The February 28 Oval Office meeting showed differences between Zelensky's and Trump's communicative styles. Zelensky used a high-context, formal, and relational style while Trump used a low-context, informal, and dominant style. These contrasting styles that created tension during the meeting are shown in the following exchanges.

Face-Threatening Dominance vs. Dignity-Restoring Resistance

Trump: *"Don't tell us what we're going to feel...Don't tell us what we're going to feel."*

Zelensky: *"I'm not telling you."*

Trump: *"You're right now not in a good position. You don't have the cards"*

right now.”

Zelensky: *“I am not playing cards”*

Trump: *“Right now you don’t. You’re playing cards”*

Zelensky: *“I’m very serious”*

Trump: *“You’re gambling with the lives of millions of people”*

Zelensky: *“I am the President of Ukraine.”*

Trump: *“You’re gambling with World War III. And what you’re doing is very disrespectful to...this country”*

Zelensky (looking closely at Trump): *“With all due respect to you...”*

Trump: *“Your country is in big trouble...You’re not winning this.”*

Zelensky: *“We are staying in our country. Staying strong from the very beginning of the war.”*

The excerpts show a consistent communicative style contrast between Trump’s face-threatening dominance and Zelensky’s dignity-restoring resistance. These tension-filled exchanges occurred in the meeting after Vance accused Zelensky of being disrespectful for him to come into the Oval Office and publicly argue the issue on Russia-Ukraine conflict in front of the American media. This is intensified when Vance continued to accuse Zelensky of bringing people on a propaganda tour. These exchanges reveal how specific linguistic choices build tension and shape the direction of diplomatic discourse. Trump repeatedly saying *“Don’t tell us what we’re going to feel”* denies Zelensky discursive authority. Zelensky’s replies *“I’m not telling you”* and *“With all due respect to you”* combine direct denial with mitigation to maintain disagreement while preserving diplomatic order and decorum. Trump’s statements *“You’re right now not in a good position. You don’t have the cards...”* and *“You’re gambling with the lives of millions of people.”* combine evaluation, metaphor, and moral accusation. The progression from *“position”* to *“cards”* to *“gambling”* intensifies the face threat by framing Zelensky as both strategically weak and reckless. With *“You’re gambling with World War 3”*, Trump blames Zelensky as the reason of a potential catastrophe. This negative attribution is aggravated when Trump directly accused Zelensky of being *“disrespectful to this country”* which attacks his diplomatic conduct. Zelensky’s calm and dignified responses *“I am not playing cards.”*, *“I am very serious.”*, and *“I am the President of Ukraine.”* reject the moral accusation and reassert institutional authority, thereby restoring his legitimacy. In addition, Trump’s *“Your country is in big trouble...You’re not winning this”* extends the evaluation to the national level and frames Ukraine as failure. Zelensky’s reply *“We are...staying strong from the very beginning of the war.”* reframes this through resilience and continuity, shifting from outcome to fortitude.

These exchanges show how Trump’s discourse relies on metaphor, evaluative judgments, and categorical assertions to emphasize dominance and construct asymmetry. This further reveals how his dominance-oriented communicative style characterized by blame attribution and face-threatening evaluations can escalate tension in a diplomatic discourse. In contrast, Zelensky’s responses consistently employ negation, role invocation, mitigation, and reframing to resist these constructions while preserving diplomatic dignity.

Gratitude as Affiliative Politeness vs. Public Gratitude Policing

Vance: *“Have you said thank you once? this entire meeting?”*

Zelensky: *“A lot of times”*

Vance: *“No. In this entire meeting, have you said thank you?”*

Zelensky: *“...Even today...even today.”*

Trump: *“We gave you through this stupid president \$350 billion...we gave*

you military equipment"
 Vance: "Did you say thank you?"
 Zelensky: "I said a lot of it to the Americans."

Trump: "...You have to be thankful."
 Zelensky: "I'm thankful."
 Trump: "...You're not acting at all thankful."

These excerpts show a contrast between gratitude as affiliative politeness and gratitude as publicly enforced obligation. When Vance repeatedly demanded for gratitude from Zelensky, gratitude is framed as something that Zelensky owed to Trump or the US government. The inclusion of "*once*" further frames gratitude as a quantifiable and observable act. This shifts gratitude from a relational practice to a publicly evaluated performance, with the meeting being televised and media outlets being present. Trump's statements intensify this framing. The repeated directive "*You have to be thankful*" introduces obligation through modality, while "*You're not acting at all thankful*" evaluates not only the presence of gratitude but its visible performance which frames it as a matter of personal conduct. These utterances publicly accuse Zelensky of giving insufficient gratitude. The lines "*we gave you \$350 billion*" and "*we gave you military equipment*" anchor gratitude in material exchange. This constructs a donor-recipient relationship which positions the United States as the provider/helper and Ukraine as the recipient/dependent who is expected to acknowledge the status. In contrast, Zelensky's responses "*A lot of times*", "*Even today*", "*I said a lot of it to the Americans*", and "*I'm thankful*" reframe gratitude as already expressed and ongoing. In particular, "*a lot of times*" is an indirect manifestation of affiliative politeness which is used by Zelensky to invoke prior instances of gratitude to the United States and reject Vance's allegation of ingratitude. When Zelensky followed with "*Even today*", the affiliative dimension of gratitude becomes stronger because this utterance serves as a reminder that he already performed the observable act of gratitude expected in the meeting. The reference "*to the Americans*" situates gratitude within broader US-Ukraine relationship rather than a personal debt to political leaders. His responses remain brief and non-confrontational, signaling restraint under public scrutiny and challenge.

Trivializing Aside and Dismissive Redirection vs. Principled Reframing and Interruption

Trump (aside): "*I do like your clothing, brother.*"
 Zelensky: "*I have more serious things...about security guarantees...cease fire... 25 times he [Putin] broken his own signature.*"
 Trump (interrupting): "*He never broke to me.*"

Trump: "*I don't want to talk about Odessa now...I want to talk about making a deal, getting peace*"
 Zelensky (interrupting): "*No. You have to come and look...We have very good cities. Yes, a lot of things [have] been destroyed but most cities is alive. People work and children go to school. It's very difficult sometimes...But we live...Ukraine is fighting and Ukraine lives...Maybe it's Putin sharing this information that he destroyed us. He lost 700,000 people.*"

These excerpts show tension between trivializing aside/dismissive redirection and principled reframing/interruption. Trump's aside "*I do like your clothing, brother.*" trivializes the issue by introducing a shift from geopolitical discussion to a trivial topic. This is reinforced by "*I don't want to talk about Odessa (a port city in Ukraine) ...I want to talk about making a deal*", a classic example of agenda-control strategy which explicitly reorients

the discussion toward immediate resolution that sidelines contextual details. This also constructs that human collateral damage of war is subordinated to transactional “deal”. Zelensky’s response “*I have more serious things...security guarantees*” resists the trivialization and reasserts the seriousness of the situation. This response explicitly rejects the shift in topic while “*25 times he broken his signature*” introduces historical evidence, grounding his argument in repeated violations of Russia or Putin. This move reframes the discourse toward conditions necessary for sustainable peace rather than surface-level agreement. Trump’s “*He never broke to me*” shifts the basis of argument from collective evidence to personal experience. This interruption disrupts Zelensky’s extended turn and re-centers the interaction from an individual perspective. In contrasts, Zelensky’s interruption and assertion “*No...We have very good cities*” strongly resist Trump’s narrative framing of Ukraine. With “*...Most cities is [are] alive...People work and children go to school*” and “*Ukraine is fighting and Ukraine lives*”, Zelensky counter-frames and rejects any portrayal of Ukraine as defeated and dysfunctional. These statements assert that Ukrainians are resilient and continue with their everyday life, going to “work” and “school” despite the war. Zelensky further rejects Trump’s framing of Ukraine as devastated by indirectly contesting information sources saying, “*maybe it’s Putin sharing this information that he destroyed us. He lost 700,000 people.*” This shows how Zelensky strategically reframes the narrative by shifting the focus from Ukraine to Russia and implying that Russia has also suffered enormously as well.

Inclusive Collective Identity vs. Self-Glorifying Comparison

Zelensky: “*Our people ... our country...our values...our freedom*”
“We need our nation to be calm that we are secured.”

Zelensky: “*Ukraine is fighting and Ukraine lives.*”
“...our people are dying”

Trump: “*I would say I’m far superior to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln...I’m only kidding.*”

Trump: “*We’ve accomplished tremendous amounts...There’s never been a first month like we’ve had.*”

The excerpts highlight a contrast between collective identity construction and self-oriented positioning. Zelensky’s repeated use of “our” to frame issues concerning the war against Russia, suffering, and national interest constructs a shared national identity and collective experience and responsibility. Reinforcing this are “*Ukraine is fighting and...lives*” and “*Our people are dying.*” which foreground both resilience and loss. His statement “*We need our nation to be calm that we are secured*” further reflects a focus on collective stability and protection which aligns leadership with the well-being of the people. With these, Zelensky constructs himself not merely as an individual negotiator but as the voice of a nation at war. In contrast, Trump utilizes self-glorifying comparison when he was asked about what place in the world history does he want to take and associate himself with any famous historical figure. His response “*...I’m far superior to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln...I’m only kidding*” introduces a comparative frame, even if mitigated by humor. Particularly, the use of the intensifier “*far superior*” is a marker of positive self-evaluation that aims to increase Trump’s competence and value compared to the comparison targets. Similarly, “*we’ve accomplished tremendous amounts*” emphasizes achievement which foregrounds leadership in terms of success and evaluation. Though Trump uses “we”

in this line, still the achievements are indirectly self-attributed and serve a self-glorifying function.

Deferential Turn-Taking vs. Floor-Seizing Control

Trump (tapping Zelensky's shoulder when Zelensky gestured toward the reporters to maintain decorum and order, signaling for them to wait): *"It's okay"*

Trump: *"Yes, go ahead please"*

Zelensky: *"If I can answer...if I can answer. Sorry. Please. Please."*

Trump: *"Go ahead...please go ahead"*

Zelensky: *"About uh...sorry, just a second."*

Zelensky: *"Can I...Can I answer?"*

Trump: *"No. No. You've done a lot of talking."*

These excerpts demonstrate contrast between deferential turn-taking and interactional control. Trump's dominance-oriented style, characterized by his interactional control strategy, is observed for most of the meeting. When Zelensky tried to gesture toward the reporters to maintain decorum and order while Trump was talking, Trump tapped his shoulder and said, *"It's okay"*. This and followed with *"Yes, go ahead please."* positions Trump as the manager of the interaction who controls who, when, and how others speak. While *"go ahead"* appears permissive, its repeated use alongside continued speaking reflects retention of interactional authority rather than full turn transfer. This is reinforced by a face-threatening statement *"No. You've done so much talking"* in which Trump asserts his conversational dominance and delegitimizes Zelensky's contribution by implying it as excessive and unnecessary. In contrast, Zelensky's lines show repeated attempts to gain the floor through mitigation and politeness markers. The repetition and hesitation in *"If I can answer...Sorry. Please. Please."*, *"Sorry, just a second."*, and *"Can I...Can I answer?"* signal both urgency and deference. These show how Zelensky does not outrightly assume his speaking rights but rather seeks permission to continue. Moreover, his use of politeness markers *"sorry"* and *"please"* attempts to soften the interruption and reduce confrontation. This asymmetry suggests that participation is not equally distributed, with Zelensky needing to negotiate access to the floor.

The analyses show that Zelensky's assertive-relational style aims to build respect and legitimization, while Trump's competitive-transactional style aims to maximize control and preferred outcome. Zelensky's use of deferential, inclusive, and assertive yet diplomatic language fits high-context norms and supports Friedrich's call for peace-promoting language (Friedrich, 2007, 2016). Trump's use of competitive, transactional, confrontational, and self-glorifying language is typical of low-context U.S. politics (Ott & Dickinson, 2019; Mercieca, 2020), which Friedrich warns can harm peace by creating competition instead of empathy. Cohen (1997) explains that this happened because they used different cultural communication codes: Zelensky expected formality and shared responsibility while Trump expected speed and control. Studies show (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019; Lü, 2018) that such mismatches often cause misunderstandings and defensive reactions. In short, their style differences created cultural friction that stood in the way of peace-oriented understanding.

Communicative Styles and Cross-Cultural Challenges Impact on the Construction and Disruption of Peace

The second research question examines how Trump and Zelensky's differing

communicative styles impact the course of the negotiation during their meeting: whether they helped build peace or created tension that disrupted it. The exchanges presented previously show how this happened in the meeting.

As discussed earlier, Trump used metaphor to compare the Russia-Ukraine War to gambling. The words “*cards*” and “*gambling*” made the war sound like a game and questioned Zelensky’s judgment. This kind of direct and confrontational language is common in U.S. low-context politics (Ott & Dickinson, 2019; Albert & Raymond, 2019). Zelensky responded by rejecting the gambling metaphor “*I’m not playing with cards*” and by reminding Trump of his official role as “*President of Ukraine*”, which brought the dialogue back to its serious purpose. This shows a peace-promoting choice (Friedrich, 2016) because he restored respect and his legitimacy through dignified assertion without resorting to personal attack. Cohen (1997) explains this as a code clash: Trump expected tough personal debate while Zelensky expected formal, diplomatic, and respectful negotiation.

Zelensky’s framing of gratitude as affiliative politeness fits his high-context, relational communication style (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2022). In contrast, Trump listing U.S. spending for Ukraine in “*\$ 350 billion*”, repeatedly demanding Zelensky to “*be thankful*” and saying Ukraine would have lost quickly without their “*military equipment*” turned the dialogue into a record of who owes who. This made the meeting feel less like a diplomatic partnership and more like an enforced obligation. For Friedrich (2016), this kind of hierarchical, transactional, and coercive tone can damage peace-building because it reduces mutual respect. Cohen (1997) would say this shows a difference in cultural expectations: Zelensky believes indirect and affiliative gratitude is enough while Trump expects public and performative expression of gratitude given the media mileage of the meeting.

Zelensky also stressed in the meeting that peace must be built on clear rules and “*security guarantees*” that are not only on paper. These underscore a focus on trust and long-term safety. In contrast, Trump’s focus is more on transactional considerations and finishing a “*deal*” quickly as illustrated in his lines “*Make a deal first*”, “*I want to talk about making a deal, getting peace*”, and “*We have a big investment*”. This shows two opposing approaches: Zelensky’s high-context style looks for strong and binding commitments first while Trump’s low-context style wants quick and visible results. These differences often lead to feeling disrespected or undervalued (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee (2019); Lü (2018). For Friedrich (2016), Zelensky’s focus on fair and reliable rules supports peace while Trump’s rush for a deal can undermine lasting trust and peace.

When Trump said “*You’re either going to make a deal or we’re out*”, he gave an ultimatum to Zelensky, which shows a power-up strategy and a coercive tone (Culpeper, 2011; Hansson, 2024). This is the opposite of Friedrich’s peace-promoting language. Instead of making space for agreement, Trump’s statements shrink the diplomatic negotiation by threatening to leave. Cohen (1997) notes that such direct threats often clash with high-context expectations of mutual respect and can make the other side pull back in self-defense.

During the meeting, Zelensky made repeated attempts to take the floor, as seen in “*If I can answer...Sorry. Please. Please.*” and “*...sorry, just a second*”. These utterances reflect a deferential orientation to turn-taking, where access to the floor is negotiated through politeness markers and repetition. In contrast, Trump’s pragmatic cues such as tapping Zelensky’s shoulder and his replies “*It’s okay*” and “*Go ahead*” position him as the manager of interactional flow. This asymmetry suggests that participation is not equally distributed,

with Zelensky's contributions constrained by the need to request speaking rights.

This contrast illustrates how communicative styles shape the dynamics of diplomatic interaction. Zelensky's mitigated and orderly attempts to speak align with high-context expectations of shared conversational space and respect for turn-taking (Wang, 2019). In contrast, Trump's control of the floor reflects a more interventionist and performance-oriented style, where authority is enacted through conversational management (Albert & Raymond, 2019). Such asymmetry shifts the interaction from dialogic exchange toward one-sided control which can potentially limit opportunities for mutual engagement.

These moments show how Zelensky's style worked to build peace while Trump's often broke it down. Zelensky's words showed respect, empathy, and collective responsibility (Wang, 2019; Kaminskij, 2022; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2022), traits that Friedrich (2007, 2016) calls essential for peace-promoting language. Trump's words often showed dominance, competition, and self-assertion (Ott & Dickinson, 2019; Albert & Raymond, 2019; Mercieca, 2020), which Friedrich warns can create hostility and block understanding. Cohen (1997) explains that these clashes happen because each man used different cultural communication codes. As intercultural studies show (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019; Lü, 2018), such mismatches can cause misunderstandings and defensive reactions. Thus, their different ways of speaking did not just show different personalities. They also shaped the meeting's ability to build or break peace.

The Role of Language in Facilitating or Hindering Conflict Resolution in International Diplomacy

The previous discussion exemplified that the leaders' styles did not just color the meeting; they steered it toward or away from cooperation and diplomatic negotiation. Zelensky's high-context, relational, and norm-focused communicative style tended to open space for agreement while Trump's low-context, dominance-oriented, and transactional style often narrowed that space. These patterns have broader implications on the role of language itself in international conflict resolution.

First, language is both a tool for expressing diplomatic position and a primary mechanism through which conflict resolution is either facilitated or hindered. Trump and Zelensky's meeting shows that linguistic choices actively shape trust, alignment, and the possibility of agreement. For instance, Trump's use of gambling metaphor reframes negotiation as risk-taking, introducing moral accusation and asymmetry, a pattern consistent with adversarial political rhetoric (Mercieca, 2020). In contrast, Zelensky's rejection of the metaphor and assertion of his legitimacy re-centers the discourse on responsibility. Similarly, Zelensky's emphasis on "*security guarantees*" grounds peace in trust and accountability while Trump's assertion of making/getting a "*deal*" prioritizes outcome over process and thus reflects a results-oriented communicative style (Ott & Dickinson, 2019). These contrasting moves show that language shapes whether peace is constructed as a shared, rule-based process or as a transactional outcome.

Second, face management determines whether dialogue remains open or becomes defensive. Zelensky's mitigated attempt to take turns reflects deference and an orientation toward maintaining collaboration and understanding, consistent with politeness strategies that reduce conflict escalation (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). In contrast, Trump's repeated demand for Zelensky "*to be thankful*" imposes evaluation and obligation, which can trigger

defensiveness and reduce mutual engagement. As Friedrich (2007, 2016) argues, peace-oriented language requires respect and recognition of the other, while face-threatening language risks turning dialogue into competition or confrontation. This shows that conflict resolution depends not only on proposals but on how interlocutors are positioned through discourse.

Third, language constructs the boundaries of possible solutions. Zelensky's lines "*Ukraine is fighting and...lives*" and "*We are...staying strong from the very beginning of the war*" frame peace within resilience and collective responsibility, while Trump's "*We gave you \$350 billion...military equipment*" reframes the relationship in transactional terms. Such framing aligns with research showing that political discourse shapes the range of acceptable solutions (Fairclough, 1995; Tan & Cienki, 2024). These differences also reflect underlying communication codes: Zelensky's discourse assumes relational continuity while Trump's emphasizes explicit exchange or "*deal*". When these codes are not aligned, misinterpretation and reduced trust follow (Lü, 2018).

Finally, mediatized settings reward performance, which can hinder problem-solving and destabilize real negotiations. A televised Oval Office encounter is not a private negotiation. It incentivizes audience design, showmanship, and credit-claiming (Albert & Raymond, 2019; Ott & Dickinson, 2019). That pressure can pull language away from joint reasoning and toward one-sided display, shrinking room for compromise. The case also shows that not all performance harms peace. Strategic, humane communication can mobilize solidarity when it serves shared values rather than self-glorification (Kaminskij, 2022; Chernobrov, 2022; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2022). Performance that centers on empathy and dignity support peace, and performance that centers on ego and threat undermines it.

These insights reveal that language is not a neutral carrier of diplomatic policy but the central instrument through which peace is enacted or obstructed. Conflict resolution depends on linguistic practices that sustain trust, face, and shared framing, while breakdown occurs when discourse introduces asymmetry, evaluation, and misaligned expectations. This clearly demonstrates that peace linguistics operates in high-level diplomacy: micro-level linguistic choices shape macro-level outcomes, determining whether interactions move toward cooperation or conflict.

Conclusion

This study examined how language constructs or disrupts peace in high-stake diplomatic interaction, addressing the gap in peace linguistics research that has largely focused on educational and interpersonal contexts rather than real-world political encounters. Through a close analysis of the televised Oval Office meeting between Trump and Zelensky, the findings demonstrate that communicative styles and cross-cultural differences actively determine the trajectory of the negotiation. A consistent pattern emerges in the paper's analysis: language that affirms dignity, sustains relational alignment, and foregrounds shared norms opens space for mutual understanding and collaboration, while language that emphasizes dominance, evaluation, and coercion constrains that space and risks escalating tension. In this way, the study moves beyond describing communicative styles to show how linguistic choices function as mechanisms of peace construction and disruption in real time.

The findings affirm that peace is not simply an outcome of negotiation, but a discursive process shaped by ethical language use. Zelensky's consistent use of deference, inclusive

pronouns, mitigation, and rule-based framing illustrates how language can sustain respect and preserve the conditions for diplomatic negotiation, even in moments of disagreement. In contrast, discourse marked by metaphorical competition, public evaluation, agenda control, and interactional control introduces asymmetry and defensiveness, limiting the potential for mutual engagement and attaining shared goals. At the same time, Cohen's framework helps explain why these effects are amplified: the interaction reflects a clash between differing cultural expectations about how diplomacy should be enacted through language. Without explicit recognition of these communicative differences, interlocutors risk misinterpreting intent, thereby weakening trust and hindering conflict resolution.

This study demonstrates that the role of language in diplomacy extends beyond representation to constituting the very conditions under which peace can be negotiated. From a critical discourse perspective, the micro-level features identified (e.g. gambling metaphors, comparative constructions, politeness markers, etc.) are not incidental but are the means through which power and alignment are constructed. The findings therefore contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice by showing that peace linguistics is not only applicable but essential in analyzing high-stakes diplomatic encounters, where the success or failure of negotiation depends as much on how things are said as on what is said.

Theoretically, this study extends peace linguistics into the domain of international diplomacy and demonstrates that its principles can account for real-world political discourse. Practically, it highlights the need for political leaders to develop heightened linguistic awareness, particularly in intercultural settings. Effective conflict resolution requires not only strategic negotiation but also discursive competence, or the ability to manage face, align communicative expectations, and frame issues in ways that sustain cooperation. This study then reinforces a central claim: language is not a neutral vehicle of diplomacy but its primary instrument, and the ways leaders speak can either enable pathways to peace or contribute to their breakdown.

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Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT (GPT 5.2) in order to correct grammar, improve style and sentence clarity, enhance transition and cohesion, and refine tone. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.