

MODALITY, PRONOUNS, AND POWER: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BENJAMIN NETANYAHU'S U.S. EMBASSY SPEECH FOLLOWING THE DOHA AIRSTRIKE

Muhamad Daffa Ghosan Ramadan¹, Slamet Setiawan²

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya^{1,2}

Email: daffaghosan69@gmail.com

Informasi

Abstract

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This study investigates political rhetoric in Benjamin Netanyahu's U.S. Embassy address following the September 2025 Doha airstrike. The objective is to deconstruct how language functions to mask military aggression and legitimize state actions during an acute diplomatic crisis. Utilizing a qualitative case study design, the research applies Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, triangulated with Teun van Dijk's Ideological Square and media framing theory, using a BBC News report as the empirical baseline. Findings reveal that at the micro-linguistic level, the speech weaponizes polarized personal pronouns and high-affinity modality markers to construct absolute moral boundaries. At the meso-structural level, aggressive political framing—specifically euphemism and spatial recontextualization—masks sovereign geography and civilian casualties to shield bilateral alliances. Finally, at the macro-sociocultural level, the discourse reproduces asymmetrical power relations by anchoring contemporary violence in historical trauma, constructing an ideology of moral exceptionalism. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how crisis rhetoric is linguistically engineered to sanitize state-sponsored violence and naturalize a paternalistic hierarchy.

Keyword: Critical Discourse Analysis, political rhetoric, moral exceptionalism, media framing, Doha airstrike.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menginvestigasi retorika politik dalam pidato Benjamin Netanyahu di Kedutaan Besar A.S. menyusul serangan udara di Doha pada September 2025. Tujuannya adalah mendekonstruksi bagaimana bahasa berfungsi menutupi agresi militer dan melegitimasi tindakan negara selama krisis diplomatik. Menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan Analisis Wacana Kritis (AWK) Tiga Dimensi Norman Fairclough, ditriangulasi dengan Ideological Square Teun van Dijk dan teori pembingkai media, dengan laporan BBC sebagai dasar empiris. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pada tingkat mikro-linguistik, pidato tersebut memanipulasi kata ganti persona terpolarisasi dan penanda modalitas afinitas tinggi untuk membangun batas moral absolut. Pada tingkat meso-struktural, pembingkai politik—seperti eufemisme dan rekontekstualisasi spasial—menutupi geografi kedaulatan dan korban sipil guna melindungi aliansi bilateral. Terakhir, pada tingkat makro-sosiokultural, wacana mereproduksi hubungan kekuasaan asimetris dengan mengaitkan kekerasan kontemporer pada trauma sejarah, sehingga membangun ideologi eksepsionalisme moral. Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini mendemonstrasikan bagaimana retorika krisis direkayasa untuk mensanitasi kekerasan negara dan menaturalisasi hierarki paternalistik.

Kata Kunci : Analisis Wacana Kritis, retorika politik, eksepsionalisme moral, pembingkai media, serangan udara Doha.

A. INTRODUCTION

Language in political communication is never a neutral instrument; it is a strategic tool for exercising authority, justifying ideology, and shaping consciousness [1]. Political leaders deliberately select linguistic resources such as lexis and modality to shape how audiences perceive power and identity [2]. These choices become even more consequential in a crisis, when leaders must reassure their audiences while projecting control in order to retain legitimacy [3], [4].

This tension is evident in the speech that Benjamin Netanyahu delivered at the U.S. Embassy following the September 2025 airstrike on Doha. According to BBC News [5], the strike hit a residential building in the Qatari capital while mediators were meeting to formalize a response to a Gaza ceasefire proposal, and it was condemned by the Qatari government and the UN Secretary-General as a violation of international law and territorial sovereignty. Speaking before an audience of allies, Netanyahu had to praise the alliance with the United States while justifying an act of military aggression on sovereign foreign soil. The speech therefore expresses a moral dissonance between the moral superiority it claims and the material reality of state-sponsored violence.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a means of examining how power and ideology are enacted through language. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework [6] links the text itself (micro level: grammar and modality) to discursive practice (meso level: the production and consumption of the text) and to sociocultural practice (macro level: wider relations of social domination). The value of this framework for political speech has been demonstrated by AlAsttal [7], who applied it to Netanyahu's address at the United Nations General Assembly and showed how micro-level grammatical choices and meso-level institutional text production serve macro-level ideological goals.

Netanyahu's rhetoric has been examined from several angles. Rababah and Hamdan [8] compared the discourse of Netanyahu and Abbas during the Gaza war and found that lexical differences were used to build polarized "self" and "other" identities, although their comparison remained general. Khaled [9] showed that Netanyahu's strategic alternation of pronouns at the 2014 UN General Assembly heightened threat perception and reinforced in-group solidarity, but analyzed a scripted address delivered well after the conflict it concerned. Algurjia et al. [10] described how syntactic parallelism in his 2024 speech to the U.S. Congress helps manufacture consent, without comparing the claims to an empirical baseline. Arifiyah et al. [11] found that high-affinity modality conveys certainty and shapes media cues in his ICC hearing statement

and its Indonesian media reception. Studies of the 2024 UN General Assembly speech further show how the exclusive “we” and historical narratives construct identity and legitimize self-defense [12], [13], while Amer [14] demonstrated that BBC and New York Times coverage of the May 2021 escalation in Gaza built a “façade of objectivity.”

Taken together, these studies concentrate on planned, scripted occasions and often conflate media analysis with the analysis of political speech. Little is known about how Netanyahu’s linguistic resources operate in an acute diplomatic crisis, when he must defend a condemned strike on allied sovereign soil. This study addresses that gap by treating media framing as a separate empirical baseline against which the speech is read. It asks: (1) which micro-linguistic features of power and modality are used in the speech; (2) how the speech uses political framing to mask the reality of the Doha airstrike; and (3) how the discourse functions as a social practice that reinforces power relations and moral exceptionalism. Accordingly, the study aims to identify, analyze, and explain these three dimensions. Its contribution is an integrated, three-level account of crisis rhetoric that links grammatical choices to ideology while testing them against a documented material baseline.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative case study design with Critical Discourse Analysis as its overarching analytical approach. The stages of the research comprise defining the bounded case, collecting and transcribing the speech, selecting and coding relevant clauses, and analyzing them at the textual, discursive, and sociocultural levels.

2.1 Research Design

A case study is a qualitative approach in which the researcher explores a bounded system through detailed, in-depth data collection [15]. The bounded case here is Netanyahu’s U.S. Embassy speech following the Doha airstrike. The design suits the central phenomenon, an ideological contradiction between diplomatic rhetoric and material reality, which must be interpreted at the semantic and pragmatic levels rather than reduced to figures. Language is treated as a socially constitutive practice [6], and the researcher acts as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis [16].

2.2 Data and Data Sources

The data are qualitative verbal data: words, clauses, and sentences spoken by Netanyahu. The primary source is the publicly available video recording of the full speech on YouTube [17]. A video source was preferred over a text-only transcript because it allows the researcher to

verify emphasis and the accuracy of the transcription. The contextual source is a BBC News report on the Doha airstrike [5]. It is not itself analyzed linguistically; it serves as the empirical baseline against which textual contradictions and ideological concealment are identified. Media framing is used only to reconstruct the material context of the crisis [18]. The selected units correspond to the research questions: interpersonal data for RQ1 (clauses with modality markers and personal pronouns), discursive framing data for RQ2 (units that reframe, suppress, or transform empirical facts), and socio-cognitive ideological data for RQ3 (positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation). The selected excerpts are indexed D01–D13.

The scope is deliberately bounded. Only verbal text in English is analyzed; gestures, voice modulation, and delivery tone are excluded, and Hebrew code-switching is acknowledged but not translated. At the micro level, the analysis is restricted to two parameters, modality and personal pronouns, which function as primary interpersonal resources for constructing power and the “Us versus Them” boundary.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through documentation, a form of non-participant observation, using systematic textual observation. The procedure had four phases. In Phase 1, the researcher watched the full video without pausing to grasp the overall mood of the event and to locate the segment concerning Doha. In Phase 2, a verbatim transcript was produced at 0.75× playback speed, with timestamps inserted at topic changes and cross-checked against the English closed captions. In Phase 3, phatic communion (greetings and small talk) was excluded, and clauses relating to the U.S.–Israel relationship, the conflict, and the Doha incident were retained. In Phase 4, the selected clauses were entered in a data sheet recording the timestamp, the clause, and its analytical category, and were coded according to the analytical framework.

2.4 Analytical Framework and Data Analysis

The analysis adapts Fairclough’s three-dimensional model [6] to the interactive model of Miles et al. [19] and proceeds recursively through three steps: data condensation (description), data display (interpretation), and conclusion drawing (explanation). At the textual level, modality is coded as high-affinity (e.g., *will*, *must*, *never*) or low-affinity (e.g., *can*, *could*, *might*). High-affinity markers project institutional authority, whereas low-affinity markers can serve as a linguistic shield that obscures power dynamics and evades accountability [20], [21]. Personal pronouns are coded as inclusive first-person forms (*we*, *us*, *our*) or exclusive third-person forms (*they*, *them*, *their*) [9]. At the discursive level, the study examines how

institutional text production frames events to manufacture consent [10], [22], comparing the speech with the BBC baseline. At the sociocultural level, the data are explained through van Dijk's Ideological Square [23], which emphasizes positive in-group and negative out-group attributes, and van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies [24]. Table 1 summarizes how each research question is aligned with theory, technique, and analytical aspects.

Table 1. Alignment of research questions, theories, techniques, and analytical aspects

No	Research Question	Theory	Technique	Aspects
1	What micro-linguistic features of power and modality are utilized?	Fairclough's textual dimension [6]; modality and personal pronouns	Documentation and textual analysis	Interpersonal meaning: modal verbs (high/low affinity); personal pronouns (inclusive/exclusive)
2	How does the speech utilize political framing to mask reality?	Fairclough's discursive practice [6]; media framing [18]	Documentation and discursive analysis	Institutional framing: euphemistic substitution; suppression of BBC-reported facts
3	How does the discourse reinforce moral exceptionalism?	van Dijk's Ideological Square [23]; van Leeuwen's legitimation [24]	Documentation and sociocultural explanation	Ideological structures: positive self-presentation (Us); negative other-presentation (Them)

Source: Adapted from the author's undergraduate thesis

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Micro-Linguistic Features of Power and Modality

Table 2 summarizes the modality markers and personal pronouns extracted from the speech transcript. High-affinity modality accounts for nearly two-thirds (64.3%) of modal usages, indicating an intent to present military decisions as absolute. First-person inclusive pronouns make up 57.1% of pronominal occurrences and unite speaker, state, and audience into a single coalition, while third-person exclusive pronouns (42.9%) isolate the adversary.

Table 2. Frequency of modality and personal pronoun features in the speech data

Linguistic Category	Sub-Category / Feature	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Modality	High-affinity (<i>will, must, never</i>)	18	64.3
Modality	Low-affinity (<i>can, could, might</i>)	10	35.7
Personal pronouns	First-person inclusive (<i>we, us, our</i>)	24	57.1
Personal pronouns	Third-person exclusive (<i>they, them, their</i>)	18	42.9

Percentages are calculated within each category (modality, $n = 28$; personal pronouns, $n = 42$).

Personal pronouns. The inclusive pronoun binds state agency to military sacrifice in D03: “...and of course the four soldiers that we lost in Gaza.” The single “we” merges the institutional state apparatus with the personal grief of the population. In the aftermath of an internationally condemned strike, this merging is a defensive maneuver that minimizes domestic polarization and projects a unified front to a U.S. audience, consistent with Khaled’s [9] finding that inclusive pronouns foster in-group solidarity under scrutiny. Conversely, the exclusive “they” severs Hamas leaders from the civilians they claim to represent in D12: “*They don’t care a hoot about you. They live in sumptuous villas.*” By emphasizing class disparity and cowardice, the pronoun strips the adversary of political nuance, which supports the finding of Kieu and Tran [12] that Netanyahu’s rhetoric relies on negative other-presentation. In D05 and D06, “they” and the distancing demonstrative “these” are linked to destructive verbs (*planned, launched, celebrated, perpetrated*), assigning absolute negative agency to the out-group and fixing it in the text as a perpetual threat.

Modality. High-affinity modality is used to display unbroken resolve in D08: “*But I don’t forget, and Israel will never forget. Never.*” The definitive future and absolute negation (*will, never*) leave no room for alternative interpretations and present the state’s actions as an immutable imperative of survival rather than a debatable policy. In contrast, low-affinity modality is selectively applied to soften inconvenient realities. In D10, “*...this action can open the door to an end of the war...*”, the modal *can* mitigates the certainty of the claim and recasts a violent act as a mere diplomatic opportunity, which deflates the gravity of the territorial violation. This dual use of modality is consistent with the observation that politicians deploy hedging as a shield against accountability [20]. Overall, absolute modality and the polarized alternation of *we* and *they* build a rigid, non-negotiable moral binary, which answers RQ1.

3.2 Political Framing and Masking of Material Reality

At the meso level, the same data points are read against the BBC baseline [5]. Table 3 sets seven framing strategies beside the documented facts they obscure.

Table 3. Framing strategies in the speech compared with the BBC baseline

Framing Strategy	BBC Baseline	Speech Excerpt (ID)	Discursive Effect
Victimhood framing	15 Israeli fighter jets discharged 10 munitions against a single residential structure in Doha	<i>"...and of course the four soldiers that we lost in Gaza."</i> (D03)	Inclusive "we" shifts the frame from state aggression to national mourning and shrinks the perceived magnitude of the strike
Deflection through negative other-presentation	Six people killed, including a Qatari internal security forces corporal; ceasefire negotiations disrupted	<i>"They don't care a hoot about you. They live in sumptuous villas."</i> (D12)	Exclusive "they" redirects attention from casualties to the alleged moral corruption of the adversary
Modal absolutism	Strike condemned by the UN Secretary-General as a violation of international law	<i>"...Israel will never forget. Never."</i> (D08)	High-affinity modality overrides legal critique with a narrative of non-negotiable historical imperative
Euphemism and minimization	15 jets and 10 munitions against a single structure	<i>"...authorized a surgical precision strike..."</i> (D05)	Clinical, medicalized wording presents a massive bombardment as a clean, controlled procedure
Spatial recontextualization	Target on Wadi Rawdan Street near West Bay Lagoon in Doha, the capital of Qatar	<i>"...they were meeting in the same place, exactly the same place, where they celebrated this savagery..."</i> (D06)	Omission of "Qatar" and "Doha" turns sovereign territory into a legitimate battlefield
Legitimation	Violation of international law and sovereign integrity condemned by the UN Secretary-General	<i>"Israel acted wholly independently... And we take full responsibility for this action."</i> (D10)	Presents the strike as accountable, independent statecraft and decouples the United States from it
Positive reframing	Six people killed; ceasefire negotiations disrupted	<i>"...this action can open the door to an end of the war..."</i> (D10)	Reverses causality: disruption of peace talks becomes an instrument of peace

Source: BBC News [5]; speech transcript [17]

Three patterns emerge. First, the speech shrinks the magnitude of the strike. It front-loads the loss of four soldiers with an inclusive "we" (D03) and recodes an assault by 15 fighter jets as a "surgical precision strike" (D05), moving the audience's attention from aggression to mourning and from destruction to procedure. Second, it erases the legal and geographic reality. The omission of "Qatar" and "Doha" (D06) and the modal absolutism of D08 remove the event from the domain of territorial sovereignty and international law, replacing the UN's legal critique with a historical imperative. Third, it reverses responsibility and causality. By claiming that Israel "acted wholly independently" and takes "full responsibility" (D10), the speech protects the bilateral alliance, notably given the strike's proximity to the U.S. Al-Udeid airbase, while presenting a condemned strike as accountable statecraft that "can open the door to an end of the war." Together, these strategies answer RQ2: the speech does not merely report the airstrike but overwrites its empirical reality with an alternative narrative in which state violence is sanitized, justified, and essential for peace.

3.3 Social Practice, Ideological Power, and Moral Exceptionalism

As a social practice, the discourse reinforces asymmetrical power relations and the ideology of moral exceptionalism during the diplomatic crisis. Through positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, it establishes a rigid ideological hierarchy in line with van Dijk's Ideological Square [23].

The first strategy is moral exceptionalism. In D06, *"They perpetrated the worst attack on the Jewish people since the Holocaust,"* a contemporary and contested military event is anchored to the ultimate historical atrocity. This creates a unique moral tier that insulates the state from ordinary legal scrutiny and presents military action as an existential imperative that supersedes international law. The second is negative other-presentation and moral polarization. In D05 the adversary is reduced to "terrorists who planned, launched and celebrated the horrific massacres," and in D08 international actors are delegitimized: *"...much of the democratic world or governments at least, have shamefully, shamefully forgotten October 7th."* The moral burden is thereby shifted from the state executing the strike onto the institutions that regulate it. This corresponds to the pattern identified by Firmansyah et al. [25], in which discourse legitimizes in-group actions while delegitimizing those of the out-group to secure audience compliance. The third is a paternalistic power hierarchy. In D13, addressing the people of Gaza, the speaker adopts a top-down register, *"Make peace with us. Accept President Trump's proposal... we can promise you a different future,"* offering promises conditioned on compliance and treating the dominated population as passive subjects whose future depends on the dominant coalition.

These three strategies share one function, ideological immunization. By casting the in-group as historically exceptional, demonizing both the enemy and international critics, and assuming authority over the out-group's future, the discourse neutralizes the diplomatic crisis. It thereby answers RQ3: the text works not as an apology but as a mechanism that reproduces the power structures placing the state above international reproach. Table 4 integrates the findings across the three levels.

Table 4. Integration of micro-, meso-, and macro-level findings

Text Index	Grammatical Unit (Micro)	Structural Mechanism (Meso)	Sociocultural Strategy (Macro)
D03 / D04	Inclusive plural: "we lost in Gaza," "our soldiers"	Co-opts military sacrifice into a shared domestic civic identity	Positive self-presentation: preserves domestic consensus during external instability
D05	Nominal euphemism: "surgical precision strike"	Deletes operational scale (15 jets) and residential location details	Humanitarian camouflage: normalizes violation of international law as law enforcement
D06	Historical analogy: "worst attack... since the Holocaust"	Abstracts the current ceasefire negotiations away from the structural baseline	Moral exceptionalism: insulates state violence from contemporary critique
D08	High-affinity modality: "Israel will never forget. Never."	Rejects external regulatory and legal critique categorically	Moral polarization: presents state resolve as an unchallengeable law
D10	Low-affinity modality: "action can open the door..."	Transmutes the disruption of peace channels into a cause of stability	Positive reframing: resets international accountability
D13	Imperative register: "Accept President Trump's proposal... we can promise you..."	Presupposes asymmetric authority to define civic conditions	Paternalistic domination: naturalizes hierarchy over dominated subjects

Source: Author's analysis (adapted from the master coding matrix in the thesis)

The three levels form a single discursive pipeline. Absolute modality and rigid pronoun polarization (3.1) drive the media framing that masks the empirical reality of a massive strike on sovereign territory (3.2). Because the grammar builds authority and the framing rewrites the event, the audience is cognitively primed to accept the ideological goal, the naturalization of moral exceptionalism (3.3). This synergy allows the state to execute a controversial military action while insulating itself from international accountability.

3.4 Discussion in Relation to Previous Studies

At the textual level, the polarized distribution of pronouns validates and extends earlier work. Rababah and Hamdan [8] showed that lexical differences produce polarized "self" and "other" identities, and Khaled [9] showed that pronoun shifting maximizes threat perception and in-group solidarity. The present findings show that this polarization operates under acute post-strike pressure: where Khaled analyzed a scripted UN address delivered months after a conflict, the exclusive "they" here acts instantly as a tactical shield that separates the adversary's leadership from its civilians and diverts attention from the state's own unilateral strike. The finding that high-affinity modality projects absolute certainty agrees with Arifiyah et al. [11]. The use of low-affinity *can* when describing the strike adds a dual-modality mechanism: absolute internal resolve is projected while a mitigated, non-threatening posture is presented to external allies.

At the discursive level, the omission of “Qatar” and “Doha” and the replacement of an aerial assault with a counter-terrorism frame operationalize the systematic deletion and spatial abstraction predicted by framing theory. The independent-responsibility frame (D10) supports Algurjia et al. [10] on the manufacture of consent, but reveals a more crisis-driven layer of text production aimed at shielding the alliance with the United States.

At the sociocultural level, the exploitation of historical trauma extends the analyses of Kieu and Tran [12], who observed that Netanyahu’s lexico-grammatical choices reframe conflict as a noble, humanitarian act. Amer [14] showed that media institutions such as the BBC may construct a “façade of objectivity” that mitigates state responsibility; the speech here capitalizes on that very vulnerability by casting critics as having forgotten historical atrocities. The paternalistic register, moreover, goes beyond reframing violence: it naturalizes a hierarchy in which the dominated population is denied political self-determination.

3.5 Limitations

This study is limited by its qualitative design and by its focus on a single address delivered to a sympathetic audience at the U.S. Embassy, which precludes generalization to all Israeli state discourse. The analysis is text-based and excludes non-verbal cues, intonation, and audience reaction. Future research could adopt a diachronic approach across several speeches, apply Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis to capture visual and prosodic elements, or compare English-language discourse addressed to Western allies with parallel Hebrew addresses to domestic audiences.

D. CONCLUSION

This study examined Netanyahu’s U.S. Embassy address following the Doha airstrike through Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA framework. At the micro-linguistic level, the speech constructs authority and moral boundaries through polarized personal pronouns and modality: inclusive pronouns (*we*, *our*) fuse state action with civilian sacrifice, exclusive pronouns (*they*, *them*) strip the adversary of political legitimacy, and high-affinity modality (*will*, *never*) projects absolute resolve and shuts down legal critique. High-affinity modality accounts for 64.3% of modal usages and inclusive pronouns for 57.1% of pronominal occurrences.

At the meso-structural level, euphemistic substitution (“surgical precision strike”), spatial recontextualization, legitimation, and positive reframing overwrite the BBC-documented reality of a strike by 15 fighter jets on a residential building in Doha. At the macro level, the

discourse works as an ideological apparatus: by anchoring contemporary violence in the trauma of the Holocaust, it constructs moral exceptionalism, delegitimizes international critics, and naturalizes a paternalistic hierarchy over the dominated population.

Theoretically, the study shows that grammatical choices, spatial recontextualization, and ideological polarization are integrated strategies rather than isolated phenomena. Practically, it offers analysts, journalists, and the public a way to recognize how euphemism and moral polarization deflect accountability for state violence. Future studies should examine multiple speeches over time and incorporate multimodal data.

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