



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Language and Linguistics*

Published by Scientific-Board LLC in the Research Journal in Translation, Literature, Linguistics, and Education (RJTLE). Volume 1, Issue 4, 2025.

ISSN: 3067-6290 (Online)
3068-8450 (Print)

Article Details

Received: 01 August 2025

Revised: 30 August 2025

Accepted: 10 September 2025

Published: 29 October 2025



Conflict of Interest: The author/s declared no conflict of interest.



How to Cite:

Al-smaihyeen, M. M., & Altarawneah, M. M. (2025). A linguistic analysis of threat tone as a strategy of pressure in president Trump's negotiations. *Research Journal in Translation, Literature, Linguistics, and Education*, 1(4), 48-56. <https://doi.org/10.64120/375gtg71>

A linguistic analysis of threat tone as a strategy of pressure in president Trump's negotiations

Mheel Malh Al-smaihyeen & Maysoon Mohammed Altarawneah

¹Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Jordan, Jordan

²Public Health Department, Head of Allied Health Professions Section

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8710-3237>

Corresponding author's email: m.smeheen@ju.edu.jo

Abstract

Threatening tone can be used as a strategic tool to apply pressure and sway results in political negotiations, where language is a powerful tool. With an emphasis on how threat serves as a purposeful rhetorical device, this study conducts a qualitative linguistic and pragmatic analysis of President Donald Trump's negotiation style. Four main themes emerge from the research, which is based on discourse analysis of a few chosen negotiation speeches and statements: explicit performative threats that assert authority and force action; conditional framing that balances accountability and coercion to prevent face-threatening acts; emotional appeals combined with hyperbolic intensification intended to heighten psychological pressure and evoke fear; and strategic ambiguity combined with audience-specific adaptation that maximizes rhetorical effectiveness across various interlocutors. The results show how these related language techniques work together to influence negotiation dynamics, maintaining power imbalances while regulating interpersonal interactions. This research adds to the general knowledge of political communication and negotiating strategies by clarifying the intricate function of threat tone as a multidimensional instrument in diplomatic situations with significant stakes.

Keywords: discourse analysis, performative speech acts, political negotiation, pragmatic analysis, rhetorical strategies, threat tone



Introduction

Political realities are greatly influenced by language, particularly in high-level discussions when rhetoric is frequently used to exert authority rather than physical force. Effective language use may exert pressure, forge alliances, elicit responses, and affect decisions. The tone of menace stands out among the many rhetorical devices political leaders employ as a particularly effective way to exert control and influence results. According to linguistic theory, a threat is not just an aggressive statement but also a speech act intended to affect other people's behavior by arousing feelings of urgency, fear, or impending danger (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Threats have the ability to create limits, convey authority, and influence the course of a negotiation. A notable change in political communication was brought about by Donald J. Trump's presidency (2017-2021), which was marked by an unorthodox, combative, and occasionally controversial approach. Trump's style, in contrast to conventional diplomatic discourse, typically eschewed nuance in favour of directness and used a tone of threat to exert pressure on foreign leaders, organizations, and even political rivals at home. Trump's words frequently demonstrated a clear aim to compel or frighten as a strategic option, whether in trade discussions with China, diplomatic difficulties with Iran, or relations with NATO partners (Mercieca, 2020; Kreis, 2017).

This use of a menacing tone was not accidental; rather, it was methodologically incorporated into his larger negotiating strategies, exposing a pattern that merits linguistic analysis. Although a great deal of political, psychological, and media analysis has been done on Trump's political speech, little is known about the precise language processes by which threats are created and used in his negotiation style. His populist appeals (Wodak, 2015), persuasive strategies (Lakoff, 2016), and rhetorical performance (Ott & Dickinson, 2019) have been the subject of prior research, but there is still a significant lack of knowledge regarding the micro-linguistic elements such as modality, lexical choices, syntactic structures, and pragmatic implications that influence the aggressive tone of his speeches and declarations.

By doing a thorough linguistic analysis of threat tone as a purposeful pressure tactic in Trump's negotiating rhetoric, this study seeks to close this gap. The study aims to understand how language is used to create threats and how these threats work practically to influence negotiating counterparts by looking at a selection of Trump's public remarks, tweets, and speeches pertaining to negotiations.

By providing insights into how language is weaponized in high-stakes international relations, this research is significant for both linguistic and political discourse studies. In addition to advancing pragmatics and discourse analysis, an understanding of the linguistic foundations of threat as a pressure weapon provides important insights into how political communication is changing in the twenty-first century. Consequently, the following research questions serve as the foundation for this study:

- i. How does President Trump's negotiation rhetoric use language to convey a sense of threat?
- ii. What are the pragmatic functions of threat as a pressure strategy in Trump's negotiation rhetoric?

Literature Review

In political discourse, language serves as a means of power assertion, perception manipulation, and strategic goal achievement in addition to being a tool for communication. The employment of threats—intentional language acts intended to coerce, threaten, or pressure others into compliance—is one of the most persuasive and effective rhetorical strategies in this field. Numerous linguistic and political fields, including as pragmatics, discourse analysis, and critical linguistics, have connections to the study of threatening language.

Threats as Speech Acts in Political Discourse

The foundational lens for analyzing threatening language is provided by speech act theory. Threats are classified by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) as illocutionary behaviors, which are meant to affect other people's conduct by imagining potential negative consequences. Threats have perlocutionary effects in political situations; they are intended to make the listener feel urgent, fearful, or deterred. According to

Allan and Burridge (2006), a conditional framework (e.g., “If you do X, I will do Y”) that frames future repercussions in connection to present decisions is frequently included in the structure of threats.

Power, Ideology, and the Strategic Use of Threat

Ideological positioning and power relations are closely related to threatening discourse. Political language, particularly threats, reflects underlying power systems, perpetuating domination over opponents or subordinate groups, according to Van Dijk (2006). Researchers have determined that Trump’s employment of threats is not an act of impulsive rage but rather a purposeful rhetorical device used to dominate the narrative and frame discussions (Mercieca, 2020; Chilton, 2017). In order to convey strength and unpredictability—two crucial components of coercive diplomacy—his threats frequently eschew conventional diplomatic terminology in favor of straightforward and frank language. The use of emotional appeals as persuasive strategies, particularly those including fear, fury, and hurry, is closely associated with threatening tone. According to Khalid Al-Gublan and Rice (2020), political fear rhetoric works by evoking feelings that both offer safety and threaten harm. When there is a lot of ambiguity and audiences are more receptive to emotional persuasion, such appeals work especially well during negotiations or crises. Trump escalates perceived threats and justifies severe policy measures or attitudes by using emotionally charged language, particularly in his tweets and press briefings.

Linguistic Characteristics of a Dangerous Tone

From a microlinguistic standpoint, threatening tone is distinguished by certain characteristics:

- i. Modal verbs that convey assurance or duty (“will,” “must,” and “shall”).
- ii. Words that are aggressive or definitive (“destroy,” “obliterate,” “cripple”).
- iii. Conditional structures and imperatives that define consequences.
- iv. Hyperbole and repetition that emphasize urgency and establish authority.

According to Jeffries (2010), critical stylistics provides instruments for examining these patterns, such as transitivity choices, presupposition, and naming and describing, demonstrating how language is employed to both convey intent and create ideological meaning.

Recent Studies on Threat Tone as a Strategy of Pressure in President Trump’s Negotiations

We now have a better knowledge of how threat tones work in political discourse according to recent empirical research, especially when it comes to Donald Trump’s communication style.

Külz and colleagues (2022) investigate a significant rise in negative tone was observed in this study, which examined over 24 million political statements from 2008 to 2020, especially during the 2016 presidential primary. This change was largely caused by Donald Trump’s remarks, which were largely responsible for the hostility that was shown. The study shows how, in contrast to conventional political etiquette, his rhetoric established a new linguistic norm focused on confrontation, violence, and threat.

To compare Trump’s speech to those of other political figures, Zhou and colleagues used big language models to create an originality score (Zhou et al., 2024). According to their analysis, Trump’s rhetoric became more hostile, repetitious, and polarizing. The study finds that these characteristics were systematic rather than incidental, demonstrating a purposeful use of confrontation and intimidation to distinguish his political brand and control the dynamics of conversations.

In order to monitor hostile, emotive, and prejudiced discourse trends during the 2024 U.S. presidential debates, Prahallad & Mamidi (2025) developed a novel annotation technique called BEADS. Trump led categories including Challenge, Fear Appeal, Dismissiveness, and Selective Emphasis, according to the study. These results demonstrate that Trump’s rhetorical technique, which he employed in both public discussions and policy negotiations, was characterized by confrontational and threat-

laden tones.

According to the reviewed literature, there is increasing scholarly agreement that threats in political discourse are not only acts of aggression but rather well-planned tactics meant to influence narratives, project power, and compel compromises. A key component of Donald Trump's public image and negotiating strategy was the adoption of a menacing tone. Even though the political influence of this approach has been discussed extensively, targeted language study that dissects how threats are formulated, presented, and deployed practically in high-stakes negotiations is still necessary. The purpose of this study is to close that gap.

Data Collection and Methodology

Based on pragmatics and critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study takes a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach. Finding, classifying, and analyzing the language elements of the threat tone that former US President Donald J. Trump employs in negotiating situations is the main goal. Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA—textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociopolitical context—forms the basis of the study. It is also enhanced with instruments from speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and critical stylistics (Jeffries, 2010).

The data collection includes a purposefully selected sample of Trump's speeches, tweets, interviews, and public remarks that make clear threats, confrontations, or negotiations. The following requirements had to be met for inclusion:

- The statement had to be addressed to a foreign leader, political rival, or organization;
- It had to contain obvious signs of coercion, pressure, or threat; and
- It had to take place in a negotiation or political standoff setting (such as trade, diplomacy, or combat).

Data sources include:

- The Trump Twitter Archive (until January 8, 2021): o <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>All of Trump's tweets are included in this database; however, those that involve pressure or threats in diplomatic or political contexts have been hand-picked.
- Public Papers on the American Presidency Project: The website address is <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.
- President Trump's official statements, press conferences, and speeches between 2017 and 2021. Search terms including "threat," "bargain," "consequences," and "you will see" were employed.
- White House Archives (administration, 2017–2021) o <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/> Official reactions to both internal and international discussions, including statements and briefings.

The C-SPAN Debate Archive and the Trump Library on Factba.se provided key excerpts from Trump's foreign policy interviews and presidential debates in 2016 and 2020. The 50 utterances (tweets, comments, and speech excerpts) that were chosen covered a variety of topics, such as trade talks with China, diplomatic threats against North Korea and Iran, disagreements over NATO spending, and internal challenges to congressional Democrats.

There were three organized stages to the linguistic analysis:

A. Analysis of Texts

- Lexical Choices: Recognizing words that are forceful or emotionally charged, such as "obliterate," "cripple," and "fire and fury."
- Modality: Analyzing how modal verbs like "will," "must," and "must" are used to assess assertiveness and inevitability.

- Sentence structure and syntax: examining imperative formulations and conditional sentences (such as “If X, then Y”) as warning signs.
- Hyperbole and Repetition: Identifying the use of hyperbole and repetitive language to heighten the severity of a threat.

B. Analysis of Pragmatics

The illocutionary force of each phrase was assessed using speech act theory:

- Was it an overt or covert threat?
- Which perlocutionary effect—such as urgency, deterrent, or intimidation—was most likely intended?

In order to comprehend context and intent, this phase relies on frameworks developed by Searle (1969) and Allan & Burridge (2006).

C. Interpretation in Context (CDA Layer)

Every comment was analyzed in light of its larger diplomatic and societal background:

- What incident led to the statement?
- What kind of discussion or conflict was going on?
- How did people respond to the threat?

This made it easier to relate linguistic traits to political outcomes and tactics.

On the basis of earlier research, a manual coding technique was created (e.g., Prahallad & Mamidi, 2025; Zhou et al., 2024). The following categories were used to tag each utterance:

- Type of Threat: Rhetorical, implicit, or explicit.
- Target: Institutions, domestic actors, foreign states, and individual leaders.

Low (recommendation), medium (warning), and high (coercion or ultimatum) are the three intensity levels.

- Emotional Tone: Control-, anger-, or fear-based.

NVivo software was used to code and organize the qualitative data, enabling the cross referencing of political functions with language aspects.

Findings

Four major themes emerge from a review of President Trump’s negotiating rhetoric about his purposeful use of threat tone as a tool of pressure. These concepts, which are further discussed below, are based on language and pragmatic theory and describe how threat influences the dynamics of negotiations.

Theme 1: Explicit and Performative Threats: Exercising Power through Direct Speech Acts

Trump’s frequent use of clear-cut threats that serve as direct orders or pledges of punitive action is a notable aspect of his negotiating style. Such statements carry out a directive illocutionary act, according to Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), whereby the act of expressing the threat enacts the desired social impact of compelling or coercing the addressee.

The performative character of these threats is best illustrated by Trump’s frequent use of straightforward, declarative statements with powerful modal verbs (“will,” “must,” and “can’t”). For example, the performative utterance “We will impose tariffs if necessary” binds the speaker to action and exercises authority through the speech’s force as well as its intention.

These overt threats are used to establish control, portraying Trump as a decisive actor with the

ability to implement laws unilaterally, according to Fairclough (1995), who studies power discourse. In order to terrify and reduce the opponent's willingness to resist, absolute resolution is shown by the absence of hedging or mitigation.

Additionally, the directness is consistent with the face-threatening act theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which holds that threats that impose demands with possible consequences are an intrinsic attack on the addressee's negative face. Trump's approach, on the other hand, frequently disregards etiquette conventions in favor of power, which increases the pressure impact in crucial discussions.

Theme 2: Conditional Threats: Balancing Coercion and Accountability through If-Then Structures

Trump regularly uses conditional statements ("if... then..") to formulate threats in a way that linguistically transfers accountability to the other side. This conditional framing implies that the punitive action is a reasonable, causally connected outcome rather than an arbitrary one, in accordance with Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975).

By portraying consequences as contingent rather than guaranteed, conditional phrasing partially mitigates the face-threatening nature of threats, maintaining some of the addressee's negative face—the desire to act freely without imposition. This pattern aligns with Brown and Levinson's politeness framework (1987).

The statement "If Iran maintains its nuclear program, harsh consequences will follow," for instance, places the blame on Iran's behavior while subtly providing a chance to get out of penalty by complying. This rhetorical device frames Trump's threats as cautions or conditional pledges rather than absolute demands, which may make them more acceptable and more difficult to categorically reject. Furthermore, by discrediting the arguments or actions of opponents and presenting the dispute in terms of logical cause and consequence, these conditionals also serve a strategic purpose by bolstering Trump's reputation as a practical negotiator.

Theme 3: Emotional Appeals and Hyperbole: Intensifying Threats through Fear and Exaggeration

Trump's threat rhetoric frequently combines stylistic exaggeration or hyperbole with emotive appeals, especially those that evoke fear. Political threats frequently use metaphors of peril and devastation, portraying opponents as existential dangers and talks as zero-sum conflicts, according to Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory (2004).

Hyperbolic and figurative phrases like "fire and fury" and "completely destroy" are meant to arouse strong emotions and heighten the perceived gravity of the danger beyond literal interpretation. Practically speaking, these emotional intensifiers heighten the threat's perlocutionary force, or its intended impact on the hearer's emotions, beliefs, and actions.

According to critical discourse analysis of populist rhetoric (Wodak, 2015), the use of fear appeals is consistent with the dramatization of dangers as a means of justifying aggressive positions by evoking existential risk. Such emotive language also serves two purposes: it psychologically strains negotiators while inspiring spectators at home by portraying Trump as a defender against perilous adversaries. By making the stakes seem urgent and serious, the emotional component of threat tone increases its coercive efficacy and raises the urgency of compliance.

Theme 4: Strategic Ambiguity and Audience-Specific Tailoring: Leveraging Uncertainty and Contextual Sensitivity

Lastly, there is strategic ambiguity in Trump's threat rhetoric, as some of his threats are inferred or ambiguous rather than explicit, leaving opponents unsure of the exact repercussions. Such ambiguity encourages listeners to deduce hazardous connotations without the speaker committing to specifics, preserving flexibility and deniability, according to Grice's theory of implicature (1975).

A shroud of uncertainty created by statements like "You'll see what happens if we don't reach a deal"

can increase fear and undermine opponents' confidence during negotiations. Here, ambiguity serves as a subtly effective psychological tool that compels adversaries to make worst-case assumptions and may exaggerate dangers.

According to Bell's audience design theory (1984), Trump also modifies his threat tone depending on the audience. Threats are politer and framed in policy terms when speaking to foreign governments in order to preserve diplomatic etiquette. On the other hand, domestic political threats frequently take a direct, individualized approach, occasionally involving derogatory or name-calling language.

By matching verbal style and intensity with interlocutors' expectations and social settings, this audience-specific tailoring maximizes rhetorical power without needlessly crossing etiquette limits, increasing the pragmatic effectiveness of threats.

Discussion

Four major themes emerge from the current study's analysis of Donald Trump's use of threat tone in negotiation situations: conditional framing, emotional and exaggerated intensification, explicit performative threats, and strategic ambiguity with audience adaptation. These themes represent a sophisticated and strategic linguistic approach. This conversation examines the findings' implications for political negotiation discourse and places them within pertinent theoretical frameworks.

Explicit and Performative Threats: Power and Authority in Political Discourse

The frequent use of direct and explicit threats is consistent with Speech Act Theory, which emphasizes how language serves as action (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Trump's unambiguous statements serve as performative acts that demonstrate his authoritative position in talks by acting to execute his desire rather than just discuss it. This directness aligns with a political leadership style that emphasizes strength and decisiveness, which appeals to audiences looking for leadership that is straightforward and clear.

But from the standpoint of a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987), such unrelenting threats seriously impair the autonomy of the addressee, putting them at danger for defensive postures and escalation. This combative approach is indicative of a power-asymmetrical negotiating tactic in which asserting one's dominance takes precedence over fostering amicable communication. According to the research, Trump's overt threats limit the amount of room for negotiation by applying psychological pressure, which may make opponents less inclined to resist.

Conditional Threats: Negotiating Politeness and Accountability

The widespread usage of conditional if-then statements demonstrates a delicate balancing act between politeness and force, which is consistent with the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson. Trump maintains the opponent's bad reputation by presenting threats as dependent on their behavior, giving them the apparent option to escape repercussions. By demonstrating a strategic or rhetorical understanding of the necessity of preserving a certain level of relational stability, this lessens the direct imposition of threats.

By presenting repercussions as justifiable and justified rather than capricious, this conditional framing also upholds the rationality principle in negotiations and lends legitimacy to threats. In keeping with Grice's theory of conversational implicature, the conditional threat serves as both coercion and a communication tactic to place blame on the adversary. This research adds to our knowledge of how politeness techniques can be incorporated into aggressive negotiation strategies to preserve pressure while preserving face.

Emotional Appeals and Hyperbole: Mobilizing Fear as a Strategic Tool

By using exaggerated rhetoric and terror appeals, threats are made more intense than they actually are, emotionally involving opponents and audiences. Threats presented using metaphors of fire and

destruction dramatize the stakes of negotiations by portraying opponents as existential threats, in line with Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory.

This emotional escalation accomplishes two goals: it mobilizes domestic support by portraying the speaker as a defender against dangers and psychologically strains opponents, possibly causing submission via fear of dire consequences. This emotional use is consistent with findings from critical discourse analysis of populist rhetoric, which emphasizes fear as a key motivator.

But if hyperbole is used excessively or inconsistently, it can also damage credibility and jeopardize long-term negotiating partnerships. In order to supplement direct threats and increase their rhetorical force in the short term, the results show a deliberate use of emotional appeal.

Strategic Ambiguity and Audience Adaptation: Flexibility in Threat Delivery

A clever negotiating strategy, strategic ambiguity uses the practical implicature principle to keep pressure on the other party without making firm promises. Ambiguous threats affect behavior without direct confrontation by putting opponents in a state of uncertainty, which can be psychologically upsetting and raise perceived danger.

At the same time, Trump demonstrates the rhetorical flexibility necessary for political communication by tailoring his threat tone to various groups, which is a prime example of audience design theory. Trump maintains face and authority in a variety of situations by using language that is suitable and maximum impact. For example, he uses formal, policy-oriented language when speaking to foreign leaders and direct, individualized language when speaking to domestic opponents.

This flexibility is a sign of a more sophisticated pragmatic understanding that threat tone is influenced by power dynamics and social positions rather than being constant. It highlights the strategic intricacy of seemingly straightforward threats, emphasizing their function in handling not only resistance but also various audiences and political allies.

When taken as a whole, these themes show how threat tone in political negotiations is a complex language strategy that strikes a balance between assertiveness, civility, emotional influence, and flexibility. The results advance our knowledge of how language can influence negotiation dynamics outside of formal agreements by acting as a tool of control and power.

Trump's use of threats is indicative of larger patterns in confrontational and populist political rhetoric, when directness and emotional appeal are used to gain control and sway results. Although these tactics are good at applying pressure, they run the risk of solidifying disputes and decreasing chances for cooperative settlement.

Future studies should examine how these threat tactics affect diplomatic relations and negotiation outcomes over the long run, as well as compare them to other political players using different rhetorical techniques.

Conclusion

A complex interaction of linguistic and pragmatic methods that serve to exert pressure on opposing parties has been revealed by this study, which examined President Donald Trump's negotiating discourse and its strategic use of threat tone. The analysis has shown how threats are not just statements of intent but rather well-crafted communicative acts intended to influence, intimidate, and negotiate power dynamics through four main themes: explicit performative threats, conditional framing, emotional appeals and hyperbole, and strategic ambiguity combined with audience adaptation.

By using overt threats, Trump uses language's performative power to limit opponents' alternatives and establish authority in a straightforward and decisive manner. By shifting responsibility for the consequences onto the addressee, the conditional framing maintains some relational face while striking a balance between compulsion and a certain amount of civility. Fear appeals and exaggerated metaphors are used to intensify emotions, which increases psychological pressure and mobilizes both domestic

audiences and opponents. Lastly, Trump's rhetorical methods are flexible and sophisticated in a variety of political and social circumstances, as demonstrated by his strategic ambiguity and audience-sensitive threat tone customization.

These results advance our knowledge of how threat serves as a complex language tactic in high-stakes political discussions, fusing aspects of rhetorical flexibility, power assertion, politeness control, and emotional persuasion. The delicate balance negotiators must maintain between forcefulness and discussion is highlighted by the fact that, although successful in applying pressure, such tactics risk intensifying disputes or impeding cooperative resolution.

By investigating the long-term impacts of threat-based negotiation strategies on diplomatic relations and contrasting them across various political leaders and cultural situations, future study could build on these findings. All things considered, this study emphasizes the importance of language in international negotiations, both as a tool and a weapon.