



A Critical Discourse Analysis of Strategic Ambiguity in Abbas Araghchi's Speeches as Iranian Foreign Minister

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Abstract

This study investigates the construction of strategic ambiguity in wartime political discourse through a critical discourse analysis of a speech by Abbas Araghchi. Drawing on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the study examines how diplomacy and militarization are simultaneously represented in the speech. A qualitative research design is employed, focusing on key linguistic features such as transitivity, modality, pronoun usage, and lexical choices. The findings reveal that the discourse strategically constructs Iran as a peaceful yet resolute actor while portraying its opponents as aggressive and unjust. This dual representation enables the speaker to maintain international legitimacy while justifying defensive actions. The analysis further demonstrates how ideological meanings, particularly resistance, sovereignty, and anti-imperialism, are embedded within the discourse through the representation of social actors and the use of emotionally charged and legally grounded language. The study concludes that strategic ambiguity functions as a powerful discursive tool in shaping political narratives and influencing global perceptions. It contributes to the field of Applied Linguistics by highlighting the role of language in negotiating power, ideology, and international relations in times of conflict.

Keywords: Strategic Ambiguity, Diplomacy, Militarization, Transitivity, Modality, Resistance

Introduction

Discourse in contemporary world politics is not a non-partisan form of communication but an important tool for producing, arguing, and defending realities. Political actors use language strategically to shape how people perceive things, defend policies, and maintain power relations. The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) paradigm views discourse as a social practice that creates and reproduces structures of ideology embedded in society (Fairclough, 1995). It is in times of geopolitical conflict, as in the recent tensions between the United States and Iran, that political discourse takes on added significance, for it is here that the concepts of war, peace, legitimacy, and resistance are defined. The recent conflict in relations between the US and Iran has aroused global concern, and the political leaders of the two countries have been engaged in a debate seeking to shape the global mindset. These discursive practices tend to go beyond the exchange of information to establish certain versions of reality that serve the nation's interests. The speeches of Abbas Araghchi are an interesting sphere for analysis in this connection because they imply both diplomatic participation and a military position at the same time. His rhetoric is likely to be a mix of

compromise and a willingness to fight, producing a duality that can be called strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity in political communication is the deliberate misuse of language to be interpreted in multiple ways. This assists speakers in dealing with a wide range of audiences and achieving multiple objectives simultaneously (Eisenberg, 1984). The ambiguity of this kind is vital in the discourse of war. It enables political actors to appear sound and peace-loving, and even to maintain an image of strength (القوة) and preparedness. This duality is particularly pronounced in international relations, as international legitimacy is equally important to the projection of national power. Both diplomatic and militaristic messages are not incompatible; rather, they indicate calculated tactical decisions within a single narrative. One of the most useful methods for analyzing complications in politicians' speeches is Critical Discourse Analysis. Scholars such as Fairclough (1995), van Dijk (1998), and Wodak (2001) argue that discourse is linked to power and ideology. Van Dijk (1998) claims political discourse often creates in-groups and out-groups, focusing on positive self-images and negative images of others. Such polarized language often appears in war, where each side sees itself as defensive, legitimate, and moral, and the other as the aggressor. The discourse centers on resistance, sovereignty, and anti-imperialism. Specific linguistic practices shape the audience's perspective and promote these ideologies. For instance, modality expresses certainty or obligation, strengthening claims (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Transitivity structures distribute actions and responsibilities, often describing their own actions as responses rather than aggression. Strategic pronoun use, such as 'we' and 'they,' builds collective identity and ideological boundaries. Lexical choices further present events in ways that align with certain political interests. Although CDA has addressed political and war discourse, there remains a significant gap in understanding how strategic ambiguity is linguistically constructed in modern Middle Eastern contexts. Existing literature rarely addresses diplomacy or militarization outside the Western sphere, instead centering analyses on Western discourses or general conflict (KhosraviNik, 2010). Furthermore, while ideological representations are studied, little research examines the linguistic mechanisms that allow conflicting views to coexist within the same communicative system. This study analyzes how Abbas Araghchi employs strategic ambiguity in his speeches during the recent US-Iran crisis. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, it examines his linguistic and discursive strategies for balancing diplomacy and militarization, representations of social actors, and the reproduction of underlying ideologies. Specifically, it focuses on modality, transitivity, pronoun use, and lexical choices as central elements in constructing meaning and ideological discourse.

Drawing on this analysis, this study aims to present that the coexistence of peace and war in political speech is not just rhetorical. It is also a tool of political bargaining over power and legitimacy within the international regime. Adopting a diplomatic stance, while justifying potential conflict, political actors can gain support from both local and international audiences. They do so without appearing as aggressors. This two-sided approach reflects broader processes in international politics. In these processes, discourse becomes a site of ideological conflict and power formation. This study is significant in Applied Linguistics for showing how strategic ambiguity is linguistically constructed in politics. It demonstrates the significance of language as a tool for crafting political realities and highlights CDA's value in exposing hidden ideologies. By analyzing a recent, geopolitically significant case, the study clarifies how discourse mediates conflict, shapes identity, and sustains power relations in the modern world.

Problem Statement

In the current geopolitical conflicts, political discourse plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and justifying actions. The US-Iranian conflict has recently drawn massive attention worldwide, and the political discourse of both countries' officials has given rise to

multiple perceptions in people's minds. In this context, the speeches of Abbas Araghchi, the Iranian Foreign Minister, can be characterized by a balanced approach to diplomacy and militarization, with promises of peace combined with those of war. This creates strategic ambiguity, allowing multiple meanings to coexist. However, few studies have examined the linguistic construction of such ambiguity during war in the Middle East. Specifically, little attention is given to the linguistic strategies, such as modality, transitivity, pronouns, and lexical choices, through which social actors are represented and reproduce ideologies of resistance, anti-imperialism, and sovereignty while simultaneously maintaining a diplomatic stance.

Research Questions

- How does Abbas Araghchi construct a discourse of strategic ambiguity by simultaneously representing diplomacy and militarization in the context of war?
- What linguistic and discursive strategies are employed to represent social actors and reproduce underlying ideologies while legitimizing war within a diplomatic framework?

Literature Review

Political discourse is replete with various textual and discursive strategies to achieve specific aims in the social, political, and global contexts. Speeches, talks, interviews, and social media posts by politicians are common media for sharing this discourse. Shakeel and Arshad (2023) analyzed two speeches delivered by former Pakistani Prime Ministers, namely Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan. The study employed a critical discourse analysis methodology through a mixed-method research paradigm to explore the discursive strategies in these speeches. Fairclough's three-dimensional model served as the theoretical framework for the study's comparative analysis. The results revealed a stark contrast between two discourses, as Imran Khan's focus was on economic development and growth initiatives, while Nawaz Shareef emphasized the sacrifices made in the past by their party and explained that those sacrifices were an essential requirement for the development of any country. Thus, Imran Khan's narrative was based on economic pragmatism and regional cooperation; however, Nawaz Sharif's discourse was grounded in historical tales. The study presented a clarified view of complex strategies used by these politicians to manipulate people's opinions about the progress of their country. Shakeel and Arshad (2023) investigated the political discourse on the basis of a mixed method. In particular, they analyzed the speech of Pakistani political leaders Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif. Using the three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis suggested by Fairclough, they compared two speeches of each leader and found out the language patterns peculiar to them. Their results showed that there were major deviations in the quantitative analysis. The speech of Imran Khan focused on economic stability and development agendas in the growth of Pakistan whereas that of Nawaz Sharif focused on sacrifices of the past and their contribution to the national growth. In this way, the speech of Khan focused on regional integration and economic realism, and the historical narratives and strength that were the major focus of the speech by Sharif. The paper has concluded by emphasizing that political leaders must exercise caution when it comes to the use of narratives to shape the opinion of the people as well as serve the national interest. The article by Mekt et al. (2024) focuses on the analysis of a political speech presented by Christian Tadele in the Ethiopian parliament in terms of CDA. The focus was to expose hidden ideologies, aspirations and schemes, which were expressed in some linguistic strategies, including politeness and general comments. The paper also looked at the use of the word we, democracy and corruption by the said official. According to the 3D Model that was applied by Fairclough, the study revealed the possibility of social inequalities that manifested in the social relationships through the application of the linguistic items in the political discourse. In addition, rent-seeking and corruption, as well as the impact of the speech on the

masses, were also discussed, which helped to increase awareness of both producers and consumers of political information, as well as provide readers with new knowledge.

Additionally, by applying the theoretical concepts introduced by Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak, Shamim et al. (2025) utilized the critical discourse analysis to investigate the interaction of language and power, which is associated with the political discourse. In the paper, the use of political language as a means of espousing ideologies, swaying the general opinion, justifying the authority, and controlling debate was exposed. The review found frequent discursive tactics of politicians to build the national identity, decrease the opposition, and maintain control as something synthesized into the meaning of worthwhile studies. They are the metaphor, repetition, presupposition, and the use of pronouns. They also examined in their study how CDA contributed to the knowledge of the sociopolitical process by confronting the hidden systems of power entrenched in the language. The review emphasized the essential nature and universal applicability of CDA in contemporary analysis of political discourse, based on case studies spanning a wide range of historical periods and political contexts.

Particularly with reference to war discourse in the context of Russia and Ukraine, Al-Faraji and Sameer (2025) analyzed two speeches delivered by the presidents of both countries, Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. These speeches were chosen because they were delivered during the war. The transitivity analysis framework presented by Halliday and Mathiessen (2004) was employed to explore the ideologies, hidden agendas, future goals, and plans of both countries' representatives as shared in their speeches. The first process was the material process; the relational process ranked second; and the mental process was the last process leaders employed to meet their goals. This research found that transitivity processes, an important aspect of representation, were common in the conversation between Putin and Zelensky. Transitivity was also more prevalent in Putin's speeches than in Zelensky's, indicating a greater share of this process. The speeches by Putin and Zelensky revealed numerous concealed political concepts through transitivity processes. These views are complex to comprehend due to cultural differences, cognitive biases, and individual differences. The skill to use ideas is more developed in politicians than in non-politicians, but their unique style can make them unconvincing. Similarly, Rababah and Hamdan (2019) conducted a comparative study to examine differences in the language of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The speeches given in the UN General Assembly concerning the Palestine war (2014) were chosen to be compared. The analysis looks at how the "Self" and the "Other" are portrayed in connection to the conflict. The "Us" against "Them" dichotomy's group polarization was examined using Van Dijk's "Ideological Square" theory. Additionally, the research employed Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar to examine how specific grammatical transitivity choices shaped the polarization of the "Self" and "Other." The findings showed that the speeches' depictions of the "Self" and "Other" represented two opposed, ideologically driven viewpoints on the Gaza conflict. Both Prime Ministers presented the "Self" as 'strong', 'human' and 'honorable' as compared to the "Other" that can be viewed as a 'dire threat' and an 'agent of destruction'. Mahfoud and Khaldouy (2022) explored the US former President Joe Biden's first speech on the war in Ukraine. The study aimed to uncover the hidden ideologies and messages in that speech drawn on van Dijk's Ideological Square Model. The results revealed that Biden used eight discursive techniques: Actor Description, Consensus, comparison, Evidentiality, Values expression, Victimization/criminalization, National self-glorification, and Presupposition. With the purpose of legitimising his latest strict restrictions on Russia, President Biden tried to portray an image of himself and his allies as defenders of liberalism, humanitarianism, and democracy against Russia and its president, who had initiated an 'unnecessary' war in Ukraine.

Adding to the exploration of war discourse, Solopova and Naumova's (2024) critical discourse analysis aimed to identify two contexts of conflict, including the American-led intervention in the Syrian civil war and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The data for analysis were selected from two speeches by U.S. presidents and were used to investigate the use of language in social, political, and historical contexts. The study identified numerous similar aspects of the war discourse, along with its linguistic and extralinguistic (historical and cultural) quirks. These components included: a) US conflict management techniques; b) negative portrayals of others; c) positive portrayals of oneself; d) a historical background of US involvement in comparable crises; and e) a call to action.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how strategic ambiguity is constructed in political discourse. Specifically, the analysis is guided by Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model, which provides a comprehensive framework for investigating the relationship between language, discourse, and socio-political context. This approach is particularly suitable for addressing the research questions, as it enables a systematic exploration of how diplomacy and militarization are simultaneously represented in political speech.

Research Design

The study employs an interpretive qualitative methodology, focusing on an in-depth textual and contextual analysis of a purposively selected political speech delivered by Abbas Araghchi in the context of the recent US–Iran conflict. The qualitative nature of the study allows for a nuanced understanding of implicit meanings, ideological positioning, and the strategic use of ambiguity in political communication.

Data Selection

The data consists of a single, carefully selected speech by Abbas Araghchi, chosen through purposive sampling. The selection criteria include relevance to the US–Iran conflict, presence of both diplomatic and militaristic themes, and representation of Iran's official stance in an international or high-level political context.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured according to Fairclough's three-dimensional model, encompassing the following levels:

1. Textual Analysis (Micro Level)

At the micro level, the study examines the linguistic features of the speech to uncover how strategic ambiguity is constructed. The analysis focuses on:

- **Vocabulary (Lexical Analysis):**

The study investigates word choices related to diplomacy (e.g., *peace*, *dialogue*, *negotiation*) and militarization (e.g., *aggression*, *defense*, *resistance*). This helps identify how contrasting semantic fields are combined to produce ambiguity.

- **Transitivity:**

This involves analyzing how actions, events, and responsibilities are assigned to different social actors. Particular attention is given to patterns of agency, such as who is portrayed as initiating conflict versus responding defensively, revealing underlying ideological positions.

- **Modality:**

The study examines modal verbs and expressions (e.g., *must*, *will*, *may*) to assess degrees of certainty, obligation, and commitment. This helps uncover how the speaker balances firmness with flexibility, contributing to strategic ambiguity.

- **Pronoun Usage:**

Pronouns such as *we*, *they*, and *our* are analyzed to understand identity construction, group alignment, and the delineation of in-groups and out-groups. This sheds light on how collective identity and opposition are discursively constructed.

2. Discursive Practice (Meso Level)

At the meso level, the study explores how the speech is produced, distributed, and interpreted. This includes:

- Identifying the intended audience (e.g., international community, diplomatic institutions, domestic stakeholders)
- Examining how the speech draws on and reproduces existing political narratives
- Analyzing how meanings are shaped through intertextuality and the broader communicative context

This level helps explain how strategic ambiguity functions as a communicative strategy tailored to multiple audiences.

3. Social Practice (Macro Level)

At the macro level, the analysis situates the discourse within its broader socio-political context. This involves:

- Examining the geopolitical dynamics of the US–Iran conflict
- Exploring global power relations and ideological struggles
- Understanding how discourse contributes to the legitimization of political actions, particularly the framing of militarization within a diplomatic narrative

This level reveals how linguistic choices are embedded in and shaped by larger structures of power and ideology.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows a systematic process starting with a careful reading of the selected speech to identify relevant linguistic and thematic features, followed by coding of textual elements related to vocabulary, transitivity, modality, and pronouns, interpretation of these features within the discursive and social contexts outlined in Fairclough’s model, and synthesis of findings to address the research questions, particularly the construction of strategic ambiguity and the legitimization of war within a diplomatic framework.

Validity and Limitations

The study ensures analytical rigor through a transparent and theory-driven framework. However, as a qualitative analysis based on a single speech, the findings are not intended to be generalized but rather to provide in-depth insights into discourse strategies within a specific political context. Future research may expand the dataset to include multiple speeches or comparative analyses.

Data Analysis

1. Construction of Strategic Ambiguity (Diplomacy vs War)

The speech constructs a dual discourse of diplomacy and militarization, central to your concept of *strategic ambiguity*. On one hand, Araghchi emphasizes diplomacy:

“Iran has never sought war... Iran and the United States were engaged in a diplomatic process...”

This portrays Iran as a peace-seeking actor committed to negotiation. However, this is immediately juxtaposed with militaristic framing:

“a defense that shall persist as long as needed”

This shift introduces a strong defensive militarization, implying readiness for prolonged conflict. The coexistence of these opposing discourses allows Iran to maintain international

legitimacy while justifying continued resistance. This aligns with your argument that ambiguity is strategic rather than contradictory.

2. Transitivity Analysis (Agency & Responsibility)

Transitivity choices reveal how agency is strategically assigned.

Opponents are represented as Active Agents as in the following examples:

“They initiated this aggression”

“They betrayed diplomacy”

“They are targeting civilians”

The US/Israel are consistently constructed as doers of violent actions.

Iran has been shown as a reactive Actor as in the examples:

“Iran stands today amid... an imposed war”

“defend themselves”

These instances show that Iran is positioned as a passive victim initially while later a justified defender.

This aligns with CDA principles:

agency = power = ideology

3. Modality (Certainty, Obligation, Moral Authority)

Modality is heavily used to express certainty and moral force. The examples showing high Certainty are given below:

“no one can believe...”

“this atrocity cannot be justified”

“must not be met with silence”

The use of such remarks creates strong persuasive tone and unquestionable truth claims.

The statements showing moral and legal obligation are as follows:

“demands unequivocal condemnation”

“you all need to call out the aggressors”

These instances position audience as morally responsible and obligated to act while strengthening international pressure and legitimacy.

4. Pronoun Usage (Identity & Alignment)

Pronouns are used strategically to construct identity. **“We / Iran”** shows collective identity, unity and legitimacy, and emotional appeal. In contrast, **“They”** shows distance, blame, and threat construction. As in the example:

They initiated... They are targeting...”

This reinforces polarization and ideological division.

5. Lexical Choices (Emotional & Ideological Framing)

The speech is lexically intense and emotionally charged. War/Violence lexicon is represented by the use of terms *aggression, barbaric, slaughtered, genocide, atrocities*, legal/moral lexicon is depicted through the use of words such as *war crime, crime against humanity, human rights, accountability*, and diplomacy lexicon is evident through the terms like *diplomatic process, negotiation, peace*.

The simultaneous use of emotional vocabulary and legal terminology creates moral outrage and legal legitimacy.

6. Rhetorical Strategies

The following rhetorical strategies have been used in the speech:

Repetition reinforces severity:

“war crime and crime against humanity”

Intensification amplifies emotional impact

“most abhorrent violations”

“unprecedentedly brutal”

Contrast highlights strategic ambiguity

“never sought war” vs “defend themselves”

7. Ideological Construction

The speech reproduces key ideologies:

Resistance

“absolute resolve and determination”

Sovereignty

“defend themselves”

Anti-imperialism

criticism of US power and intervention

Moral Superiority

appeals to conscience:

“our conscience will judge us”

These ideologies justify war as defensive and ethical and position Iran as morally right.

Discussion

The speech by Abbas Araghchi demonstrates a highly strategic use of language to construct simultaneous diplomacy and militarization. Through transitivity, modality, pronouns, and lexical choices, Iran is represented as a peaceful yet resolute actor, while opponents are framed as aggressive and immoral. This dual discourse produces strategic ambiguity, enabling the speaker to legitimize resistance and potential war and maintain a diplomatic image internationally. Ultimately, the discourse functions as a tool of power, ideology, and international persuasion, reinforcing narratives of resistance, sovereignty, and anti-imperialism.

The analysis of the speech by Abbas Araghchi reveals that political discourse in wartime is strategically constructed to serve multiple, and sometimes seemingly contradictory, purposes. The findings demonstrate that the coexistence of diplomacy and militarization is not accidental but a deliberate discursive strategy that reflects what this study terms strategic ambiguity. By simultaneously emphasizing peace and readiness for defense, the speaker is able to maintain a balance between international legitimacy and national strength. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, particularly within the framework of Norman Fairclough (1995), this duality reflects the relationship between language and power. At the textual level, linguistic features such as modality, transitivity, and lexical choices work together to construct a coherent narrative in which Iran is positioned as a victim of aggression yet justified in its response. At the discursive level, the speech appears to be carefully designed for an international audience, aiming to persuade global institutions and publics of Iran’s moral and legal stance. At the social level, the discourse reflects broader geopolitical tensions and power struggles, particularly between Iran and Western powers. The study also highlights the importance of transitivity and agency in shaping ideological meaning. By presenting the opposing actors as initiators of violence and Iran as a reactive defender, the discourse shifts responsibility and constructs a morally justified stance. Similarly, the use of strong modality and obligation reinforces certainty and moral authority, compelling the audience to accept the speaker’s claims as unquestionable truths.

Additionally, the combination of emotionally charged vocabulary with legal terminology strengthens both emotional appeal and institutional legitimacy. Terms such as “genocide” and “barbaric attack” evoke moral outrage, while references to “war crimes” and “human rights” ground the discourse in internationally recognized legal frameworks. This dual strategy enhances the persuasive power of the speech and supports the construction of a morally superior identity. Overall, the findings confirm that strategic ambiguity is realized through a complex interplay of linguistic and discursive features, enabling the speaker to simultaneously construct diplomacy and militarization while reinforcing key ideologies of resistance, sovereignty, and anti-imperialism.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how strategic ambiguity is constructed in wartime political discourse through a Critical Discourse Analysis of a speech by Abbas Araghchi. The findings reveal that the speech employs a range of linguistic and discursive strategies to simultaneously project a commitment to diplomacy and a readiness for militarization. Through the use of transitivity, modality, pronouns, and lexical choices, the discourse constructs Iran as a peaceful yet resolute actor while portraying its opponents as aggressive and unjust. This dual representation allows the speaker to legitimize defensive actions while maintaining a diplomatic image on the international stage. Importantly, the concept of strategic ambiguity emerges as a key contribution of this study, highlighting how political actors use language not only to communicate but also to navigate complex geopolitical realities. The findings reinforce the view that discourse is a powerful tool for shaping perceptions, constructing identities, and sustaining power relations in times of conflict.

Implications of the Study

This study contributes to the field of Applied Linguistics and CDA by extending existing frameworks to include the concept of strategic ambiguity as a central feature of wartime political discourse. It demonstrates how Norman Fairclough's model can be effectively combined to analyze complex and dynamic political texts. The study also highlights the importance of integrating linguistic analysis with socio-political context to fully understand discourse. For the field of Applied Linguistics, this study highlights the value of teaching students how to critically analyze political discourse. Incorporating CDA into language education can enhance learners' awareness of hidden ideologies, power relations in language, and persuasive strategies in real-world communication.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited to the analysis of a single speech, which may not fully represent the broader discourse of Abbas Araghchi. Future research could analyze multiple speeches over time, conduct comparative studies with other political leaders, and explore audience reception of such discourse.

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