

# ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКАЯ, ПРИКЛАДНАЯ И СРАВНИТЕЛЬНО-СОПОСТАВИТЕЛЬНАЯ ЛИНГВИСТИКА

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## STANCETAKING AS A MANIPULATIVE RESOURCE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose.** This study uses a corpus of V. Zelensky's speeches given before foreign parliaments as the basis of a pragmatic analysis and applies to it the stance framework of Hyland. It aims to examine stance-taking as a manipulative strategy and its linguistic realization in Zelensky's representations of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. More specifically, this study focuses on how the Ukrainian President manipulates stance features in his political rhetoric to control the power relationship with an audience and persuade them into accepting his ideas and policies.

**Methodology.** 15 Zelensky's speeches delivered before foreign parliaments were used as materials for the study. The study aims to analyze how stance is realized linguistically in presidential discourse, the methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis were applied. Based on the results drawn from the quantitative analysis, pragmatic functions of stance features, speaker's preferences for these resources and their frequencies in the texts were revealed.

**Results.** The analysis showed that yet Zelensky used all three types of stance-taking resources – boosters, attitude and self-mention markers, he opted for the latter two ones, avoiding the extensive use of certainty and intensity devices. The article concludes that the strategic use of stance features is of great value to the politician as it helps emphasize or de-emphasize social actions or social actors, enhance credibility, and persuade recipients into believing or doing something.

**Research implications.** The article specified the concept of stance in relation to political communication and demonstrated that stance features can serve a manipulative purpose exploited by politicians to enhance credibility. This study demonstrates the effectiveness of using stance to study manipulation in political communication.

**Keywords:** stance-taking, stance features, boosting, self-mention, attitude, political discourse, manipulation

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Научная статья

## СТРАТЕГИЯ ПОЗИЦИОНИРОВАНИЯ КАК МАНИПУЛЯТИВНЫЙ РЕСУРС ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ КОММУНИКАЦИИ

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**Аннотация**

**Цель.** Прагматический анализ в данном исследовании основан на подборке выступлений В. Зеленского перед иностранными парламентами, к которым применяется подход Хайланда. Целью исследования является изучение стратегии позиционирования как манипулятивного ресурса и ее лингвистической реализации в представлениях Зеленского о российско-украинском конфликте. В частности, это исследование посвящено тому, как украинский президент манипулирует позицией в своей политической риторике, чтобы контролировать отношения власти с аудиторией и убеждать ее принять его идеи и политику.

**Процедура и методы.** Материалом исследования стали 15 выступлений украинского президента В. Зеленского в парламентах зарубежных государств. С целью исследования лингвистической реализации стратегии позиционирования в политическом дискурсе были использованы методы количественного и качественного анализа. На основе результатов количественного анализа были выявлены прагматические функции средств позиционирования и частотность их использования говорящим.

**Результаты.** Анализ показал, что, несмотря на то, что Зеленский использовал все три типа средств формирования позиции – стимуляторы, маркеры отношения и самореференции, он предпочитает последние два, избегая широкого использования средств выражения уверенности и усиления. В статье делается вывод о том, что стратегическое использование особенностей позиции имеет большую ценность для политика, поскольку оно помогает подчеркнуть или преуменьшить значимость социальных действий или социальных акторов, повысить доверие к ним и убедить реципиентов поверить во что-то или сделать что-то.

**Теоретическая значимость.** В статье уточняется понятие стратегии позиционирования и средств её реализации применительно к политической коммуникации и устанавливается роль данной стратегии как манипулятивного ресурса политического оратора. В целом, данное исследование доказывает эффективность использования стратегии позиционирования для исследования манипуляции в политической коммуникации.

**Ключевые слова:** позиционирование, средства позиционирования, бустинг, самореференция, отношение, политический дискурс, манипуляция

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## Introduction

Politicians strategically use language for specific purposes not simply producing texts that represent a social reality, but also constructing and negotiating social relations by making linguistic and discursive choices. They seek to create a credible representation of themselves by claiming solidarity with an audience, evaluating and controlling the level of personality to build persuasive arguments. Political discourse is therefore a semiotic practice which is socially constituted and determined by social structures and relations. Stance as an interactional element is a helpful manipulative tool used in political text and talk to control the propositional content, present viewpoints, project values, capture trust, and build rapport with an audience, being both an act of representation and expression that constitutes a type of meaning represented in discourse [1].

In recent years, stance has established itself as an analytical tool used in research on a variety of manipulative discursive practices, including political ones [2–9]. In A. Capone's study, for example, Barack Obama's speeches were explored from the perspective of pragmemes. The researcher found that the discourse strategy chosen by the US President is aimed at reversing the direction of influence from the people in control to the people controlled [2]. B. Sukma, who investigated stance markers in Obama's campaign speeches, found that the American President made use of a variety of stance categories, including hedges, boosters, attributors, and attitude markers. The high frequency of attitude markers in Obama's speeches indicated an attempt to build an emotional relationship with the public [3]. E. Mirzaeian adopted an intracultural approach to explore the similarities and differences between Barack Obama and Donald Trump in terms of stance markers used in their speeches on the Iran nuclear deal [4]. Z. Maalej made an attempt to explore person deixis in the speeches of the president of Tunisia from the perspectives of critical discourse analysis [5]. M. Stepanova's study compared key manipulation resources

in political speeches by Barack Obama and David Cameron and revealed that while the image of the US president is emotional type, the image of the British prime-minister is rational [6]. Russian President Putin's rhetoric became a focus of research in the study by N. Babich, who identified linguistic resources of persuasion and structural and semantic features of presidential interviews [7].

Regarding Zelensky's political discourse, D. Luthfiyati and F. Nur Hamidah explored the employment of first-person pronouns by the Ukrainian President and revealed that he overuses singular personal pronouns to express gratitude and admiration, professional and personal experience, arguments, aspirations, and commitment [8]. Using Zelensky's online speech at the Japanese parliament in March 2022, M. Matsuoka and R. Matsuoka have explored the ways in which V. Zelensky establishes solidarity with the public. The utterances produced by the Ukrainian President were evaluated in terms of relative power, social distance and weight of imposition. The analysis revealed that Zelensky's speech adopted both face-threatening and face-boosting effects [9]. Another study of Zelensky's discourse was conducted by N. Guliashvili, who made an attempt to illustrate how linguistic resources are used by the Ukrainian President to "discursively construct national identity in the context of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war" [10, p. 779].

Even though the Ukraine events have been extensively examined from different perspectives and the findings obtained are valuable, there seems to be insufficient research on how it is discursively constructed drawing upon the concept of stance as an effective manipulative tool in discourse. The present study therefore examines stance-taking and its linguistic realization in Zelensky's representations of the war intended to exercise control over the audience and legitimize political decisions. To achieve the purpose, the research seeks to identify the distribution and frequencies of stance features used by the Ukrainian President and to describe the pragmatic functions they perform.

## Methodology

With the aim to show how stance features can enhance the manipulative effect of claims in political discourse, presidential video addresses on the Ukraine conflict which are stored at the official presidential websites were scrutinized and interpreted. The speeches were derived from the official website of V. Zelensky *ze2019.com*, which publishes Zelensky's speeches in Ukrainian and English. The launch of the special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022 was employed to determine the limits of the period from which the speeches were collected. Only monologue texts were selected for the analysis. The data selection criteria therefore included: timeframe (February 2022 till present); content focus (Ukraine crisis); type of speech (monologue); language (English).

The texts represent 15 Zelensky's speeches. All the speeches included in the corpus were delivered before the legislative bodies of the foreign countries. The size of this corpus was 45,801. On average, the speeches selected for the study were about 1,500-3,000 in length. The longest speech (about 1900 words) was delivered before the US Congress on December 22, 2022.

For the purpose of this study, K. Hyland's taxonomy of stance resources was adopted [11]. The rationale behind adopting this model is threefold: first, the taxonomy appears to be comprehensive and provides a clear understanding of various stance features varying from indicators of authorial presence to the expressions of certainty and feelings towards social events, social actions, and social actors; second, the employment of the model as an analytical tool facilitates comparison of the research results; and third, the taxonomy allows linguistic items to correlate with specific pragmatic functions. The taxonomy includes hedges (*may, might, likely, possibly*) used to suppress full commitment to propositional content; boosters (*evident, show, certainly*) that allow speakers to express certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic; attitude markers (*surprising, crucial, tragic,*

*serious*) employed to indicate the speaker's affective attitude to propositions; and self-mention markers (*I, we, my, our*) that manifest the explicitness of an authorial presence. It should be noted that hedges as a type of stance features were excluded from the analysis as far as mitigation weakens claims and reduces the degree of reliability of speaker's statements, which is not typical of persuasive crisis discourse requiring claims to be asserted categorically rather than prudently to justify unpopular policies often taken in times of crisis. Even though hedges may convey an attitude of deference to recipients, their ability to express doubt about the truth of statements and to open room for a potential disagreement does not contribute to enhancing the persuasive effect in crisis discourse intended to influence recipients' beliefs and actions. The stance model suggested shows how speakers exploit community-sensitive linguistic resources to represent themselves and their positions to be more convincing in their arguments. These patterns of effective persuasion are very common in political speeches, particularly those given on crisis-related occasions.

As the study aims to analyze how stance is realized linguistically in presidential discourse on Ukraine crisis, the methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis were applied. The texts of the speeches were downloaded from the website, converted to the Microsoft DOCS format and analyzed to calculate the total number of stance features. The quantitative analysis followed two stages. First, the texts were scrutinized for stance features using Wordsmith Tools (version 8). Every occurrence of a stance feature was manually double checked in context to verify that it was serving the stancetaking function. This was done by comparing every occurrence with the definition of stance provided by Hyland [11]. Examples that did not match the definition of stance were excluded from the count. Each type of stance-taking (boosting, attitude, and self-mention) was then analyzed to determine its frequency. Normalized frequencies were calculated to

compare the use of stance features in the corpus. The frequencies were calculated per 10,000 words. The results of the quantitative analysis were summarized in a table format. The quantitative analysis was thus combined with a manual qualitative analysis of the examples which was conducted to interpret the findings of the quantitative analysis. To ensure in-depth exploration into the use of stance features, examples were taken from the corpus and explanations were provided to describe the functions of stance features found.

Findings

The quantitative analysis of the corpus revealed that the normalized frequencies of stance features differed significantly in the corpus. The analysis revealed the predominance of self-mention markers (58.1 per 10,000 words) over the other types of stance. Attitude markers ranked second with 52.3 per 10,000 words. Boosters were least frequent in the corpus (see Table 1).

Table 1 / Таблица 1

Frequencies of stance features / Частотность маркеров позиционирования

| Stance features         | Normalized frequency |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Boosters                | 38.6                 |
| Attitude markers        | 52.3                 |
| Self-mention markers    | 58.1                 |
| - I-pronouns            | 7.4                  |
| - inclusive we-pronouns | 38.1                 |
| - exclusive we-pronouns | 12.6                 |
| Total                   | 149                  |

Below you will find the contextual analysis of stance markers used by V. Zelensky in his speeches to gain political support.

**1. Boosters.** Because every point made in presidential speeches is subject to the recipients' interpretation and acceptance, boosters make persuasion more effective by strengthening the asserted position. They help in convincing the recipients of reason-

ability of policies; by conveying a clear stance towards the certainty of a proposition, they help the politician project credibility as a national leader and create an image of authority and conviction in his decision-making. As M. Waldman claims, "successful leadership in crisis requires that the public trust the leaders to tell the truth" [12, p. 120]. The analysis revealed that to succeed in his communication with the public, Zelensky sought to build a relationship of trust using appropriate boosting resources. Here are two examples from the corpus in which Zelensky uses boosters to strengthen the argument and convince the audience of his position about the future of Ukraine and democracy in his country.

(1) *And next year will be a turning point, **I know** it, the point when Ukrainian courage and American resolve **must** guarantee the future of **our** common freedom, the freedom of people who stand for their values.*

(2) ***I know** that everything depends on **us**, on Ukrainian armed forces, yet so much depends on the world.*

In his persuasive efforts, delivering a speech before the US Congress, V. Zelensky exploits the boosting potential of the epistemic verb 'know' and the modal 'must'. In addition, he strengthens the illocutionary force of his statement through the use of the first-person pronouns 'I', 'our' and 'us' to emphasize his personal stance and express solidarity with the US Congressmen ('our common freedom').

In addition to indicating certainty and creating a credible image, V. Zelensky also sought to increase the emotive strength of his claims through the employment of intensity boosters, as illustrated in (3).

(3) *Our people are **very much** motivated. **Very much** so.*

Double employment of the adverbial phrase 'very much' helps V. Zelensky connect with the audience – the European Parliament – emotionally and intensifies the manipulative effect of the claim. He sees the problems he touches upon as vital and seeks to encourage the audience to consider them



in the same way. The degree adverb 'very' followed by 'much' is helpful in enhancing persuasion through a committed attitude. The analysis revealed that along with the modal 'must', the adverb 'very' was the most frequent boosting device in Zelensky's speeches – it occurred 21 times.

**2. Attitude markers.** Attitude markers indicate affective perspectives also influencing the public and projecting a positive image of the own country and its allies and a negative image of the enemy, which is one of the most common discursive strategies in Zelensky's discourse. Using this strategy, he devoted significant time to demonizing the enemy, characterizing his country as a victim to win the audience's support and sympathy. Adjectives, adverbs and nouns used as attitude markers enabled V. Zelensky to present information as true, false, important, disturbing or surprising, and to create different images of social actors thus emotionalizing the speech. The following instance (4) features negative emotion tokens, the function of which is to reveal Zelensky's evaluation of the Russian policies and discredit them to induce hatred in the audience. V. Zelensky describes Russia as an occupier, a threat, or a tyranny seeking to absorb Ukraine and destroy the Ukrainian cities. From the cognitive point of view, he sought to manipulate the mind of the audience through the control of their thoughts, emotions, and actions. Presenting Russia with negative characteristics helps him create a depersonified vision of the enemy and increase anger and hatred towards Russia and the Russian Government.

(4) *We must act united – to defeat the **aggressor** and focus all our capabilities and energy on addressing these challenges. ... The **occupiers** have a significant advantage in artillery.*

The analysis revealed that the most common patterns used for describing Russia are observed with the words 'aggressor' (12 instances) and 'occupier' (10 instances) as in the above examples and the word 'threatening' (10 instances), as illustrated below:

(5) *It is obviously **threatening** Kazakhstan and the Baltic states...*

Zelensky does not hesitate to rely on the appeal to fear with the aim of creating a mental conflict between what is considered ethically correct (being a pacifist) and what is needed to protect the country against the threat posed by the enemy. It is a strategy of manipulation realized through the use of attitude markers, where the speaker creates a polarized vision of the facts, focusing those that favor his position and defocusing those data that could harm it.

Additionally, the analysis revealed that while V. Zelensky used negative attitude markers predominantly towards Russia and the Russian Government, positive descriptions were attributed both to Ukraine, the Ukrainian people and the Ukraine's allies, as in below.

(6) *I am certain that **devoted** soldiers and officers of Russia's Armed Forces will perform their duty with **professionalism** and **courage**.*

(7) *Threw everything it had against the free world, just like the **brave** American soldiers which held their lines and fought back Hitler's forces during the Christmas of 1944.*

(8) *We already built **strong** Ukraine, with **strong** people, **strong** army, **strong** institutions together with you.*

Combined with the high occurrence of negative descriptions of Russia, positive attitude markers helped create a favorable image of Ukraine and Ukraine's supporters based on the dichotomist worldview.

**3. Self-mention markers.** As O. Dontcheva-Navratilova puts it, constructing an authorial persona is one of the key strategies for enhancing credibility [13] This strategy can be realized through the use of self-mention markers, which manifest the explicitness of an authorial presence, measure the distance between the speaker and the public and are employed to manipulate people adding significant power to persuasive language. In political discourse, self-mention realized through the personal pronouns has an important ideological dimension. As

T. van Dijk claimed, “pronouns are perhaps the best known grammatical category of the expression and manipulation of social relations, status and power, and hence of underlying ideologies” [14, p. 203].

*I*-pronoun is one of the most effective ways of signalling personal identity, speaker’s beliefs, experience, and intentions and taking personal responsibility for decisions. In addition to contributing to greater speaker visibility in discourse, *I*-utterances have “all the reliability of first-hand claim” [15, p. 92].

In Zelensky’s speeches *I*-pronouns were predominantly used to convey personal opinions and convictions, as in here:

(9) *I believe that today we are showing everybody that’s exactly what we are.*

In this example derived from Zelensky’s speech made before the European Parliament, *I*-pronoun emphasizing his intent to identify himself with the argument is used together with exclusive *we*, which indicates the speaker’s desire to express solidarity with the Ukrainian people fighting for their survival.

In Zelensky’s discourse, *I*-pronoun was also frequently used within the performative phrases as in ‘I want to thank’, ‘I would like to thank’, or ‘I thank’ to demonstrate gratitude to those who support his policies. Demonstrating the ability to be grateful appears to be a very efficient manipulative strategy for imparting trust in the speaker and build confident rapport with the public.

(10) *Now, on this special Christmastime, I want to thank you, all of you. I thank every American family which cherishes the warmth of its home and wishes the same warmth to other people. I thank President Biden and both parties, at the Senate and the House, for your invaluable assistance. I thank your cities and your citizens who supported Ukraine this year.*

(11) *I would like to thank those leaders who supported our Black Sea Grain Initiative, and program “Grain from Ukraine”.*

Yet *I*-pronoun can perform a variety of pragmatic functions, it was not as frequent as *we*-pronoun, which performed a variety

of discursive functions, including appealing to unity and shared experience, expressing solidarity or consensus, or sharing duties. The corpus featured the predominance of inclusive uses of *we*-pronouns.

(12) *We are Ukrainians We have a desire to see our children alive.*

Inclusive *our* is used to position Zelensky in solidarity with the Ukrainian citizens. This type of self-mention functions as a persuasive ‘inclusion strategy’, a strategy of group orientation, in which speakers seek to unite themselves with the public. The more first person plural pronouns are used, the more group oriented the speaker is. Solidarity in this case triumphs over personal responsibility and authoritativeness, thus reflecting a sense of unity. In this example, ‘we’ is a marker of solidarity with the Ukrainian people who want to protect their country.

Regarding exclusive *we*, it displays Zelensky’s institutional identity as a leader of the country addressing the audience on behalf of the Ukrainian Government.

(13) *You are demanding security guarantees from NATO, but we also demand security guarantees. Security for Ukraine from you, from Russia and other guarantees of the Budapest memorandum.*

This example also features a clear opposition of positively presented *we* (the Ukrainian people) and negatively presented *they* (Russia). The plural pronouns in Zelensky’s discourse are valuable linguistic means used to promote a dichotomist worldview. V. Zelensky depicts Russia as an aggressor who is ready to cross any red lines to annex Ukraine’s territories thus creating a threat to the national security. Ukraine (*we*) is presented as a victim of Russia’s aggressive policies, and the war is the only chance to assert the right to peaceful development.

## Discussion

Drawing upon Zelensky’s speeches on the Russo-Ukrainian relationship, I made an attempt to illustrate how stance features can be exploited in political discourse with the aim to influence the public and justify presiden-

tial policies. Achieving the research purpose, the study revealed some trends in the use of stance features by the Ukrainian President.

It was found that V. Zelensky used stance features to realize a number of pragmatic functions such as demonstrating conviction in his policies and ideas, expressing attitude towards social actions and social actors, and presenting his discursal self.

The analysis revealed that among the three types of stance employed to achieve persuasive effects, self-mention markers were more frequently used in Zelensky's discourse.

The use of boosters in political discourse indicates Zelensky's attempts to speak with confidence by suppressing alternative ideas. In manipulative texts such as crisis-related public speeches, boosters are helpful in creating an impression of certainty and assurance and instilling trust and confidence in the audience. As M. Peacock put it, boosters that increase the force of statements persuade an audience that the claims are justified and that the observations made by the speaker are facts rather than assumptions [16].

The high density of attitude markers might correspond with the explicit communication style adopted to appear to be a transmitter of feelings and to hold the burden of communication. Attitude markers were predominantly used for emotionalizing claims by appealing to negative or positive feelings. The role of the affective dimension of manipulative discourse has been emphasized in a number of studies. Particularly, R. Breeze claimed that "politicians who can embody and express feelings that resonate with large sectors of the electorate, or who know how to carry voters with them on an affective level, are often highly successful" [17, p. 27]. In the same vein, T. van Dijk argued that appeals to attitudes and emotions of the recipients are those discourse structures that enhance the manipulative effect of arguments [18]. The analysis revealed that V. Zelensky tended to project positive assessments and emotions onto his own country and allies while negative lexical items were used to depict the en-

emy. This juxtaposition is well explained in terms of van Dijk's Ideological Square Model of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. According to van Dijk, the polarization between *Us* and *Them* is manifested through linguistic resources employed to realize one of the following strategies: 1) positive self-representation, i.e. representing the in-groups' members (*Us*) positively by de-emphasizing their negative and emphasizing their positive features; 2) negative other representation, i.e. representing the out-groups' members (*Them*) negatively by de-emphasizing their positive and emphasizing their negative features [14]. Attitude markers proved to be effective linguistic resources used by Zelensky to portray favorable images of *Us* and *They*.

Regarding self-mention markers, they were used most frequently by V. Zelensky and indicated a conscious choice to adopt a particular stance and authorial identity. Employing a specific personal pronoun to refer to himself may reveal how distant the speaker and public are from one another [19]. Taking different types of self-mention markers into account, inclusive *we*-pronouns were most highly preferred by Zelensky. The analysis revealed that V. Zelensky used *I*-pronouns mainly to express personal opinions or gratitude to those who support his country and extremely rarely to convey his personal opinions and declare personal responsibility. Regarding the two types of *we*-pronoun, exclusive *we* was also not frequent (30 occurrences), which indicates Zelensky's desire to avoid speaking on behalf of the Government and the people. It was also found that *we*-pronoun was frequently used to emphasize an *Us* vs *Them* distinction through the negative evaluation of the enemy and positive evaluation of Ukraine and the Ukrainian allies. This common strategy of political rhetoric – the framing of the world in terms of dichotomies – is one of the mainstays of political rhetoric [20; 21], which enhances the persuasiveness of claims.

The analysis showed that through the use of straightforward, emotional and personal



language, V. Zelensky sought to convey his concern over the Russia-Ukraine conflict with clarity and conviction. The power to influence the public or change was demonstrated by his command of stance features. Knowledge of the strategic use of stance features is therefore of great value to the politician as it helps emphasize or de-emphasize social actions or social actors and persuade recipients into believing or doing something.

### Conclusion

The study aimed to analyze stance markers in crisis discourse drawing upon a corpus of Ukraine-related speeches given by Ukrainian President Zelensky. More specifically, this study focused on how V. Zelensky manipulates stance features in his political rhetoric to control the power relationship with an audience and persuade them into supporting his decisions. Based on the re-

sults drawn from the quantitative analysis, the types, frequencies and pragmatic functions of stance features were revealed.

Overall, the empirical material and the interpretative analysis showed that an attempt to draw upon the concept of stance could be valuable in the analysis of manipulative discourse, and this concept opens a prospective area for research in the study of political communication. Therefore, I hope that this article provides insights into the field of political discourse analysis where stance plays a crucial role.

I am conscious that the small size of the corpus employed in the present study may affect the findings, and more research should be carried out on this issue. Despite this limitation, I believe that the goal of this research – to demonstrate that stance features can serve a manipulative purpose and are exploited by politicians to gain support and enhance credibility – has been achieved.

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