



CONVERSATIONAL ANALYSIS OF DELL HYMES' SPEAKING MODEL IN DONALD TRUMP AND VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY MEETING

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Abstract

This study examines the communicative dynamics of the public meeting between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky by integrating Conversation Analysis (CA) with Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model. The research aims to uncover how power relations, diplomatic strategies, and communicative norms are constructed through real-time interaction. Using eight selected excerpts from the meeting, the analysis focuses on turn-taking, interruptions, preference organization, tone, footing, and the broader contextual elements that shape meaning. The findings reveal that Trump consistently dominates the discourse through extended turns, directive speech acts, and repeated interruptions, positioning himself as the controlling figure in the interaction. Zelensky, in contrast, employs politeness strategies, emotional appeal, and self-repair to maintain diplomatic face, though Trump's assertive style frequently overshadows these attempts. The SPEAKING model further demonstrates that the Setting and Participants' roles create a performative atmosphere influenced by media presence. At the same time, the Key and Norms reflect a shift away from conventional diplomatic politeness toward confrontational framing. Overall, the study shows that diplomatic encounters are not merely informational exchanges but sites where political identities, power asymmetries, and strategic messaging are negotiated through interaction.

Keywords: conversation analysis, diplomatic discourse, preference organization, SPEAKING model, turn-taking

To cite this article:

Nasution, Jamaluddin; Zein, Mutiara; Rahmah, Cut Nadia Muji. (2026). Conversational Analysis of Dell Hymes' Speaking Model in Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky Meeting. *Journal of Research on Language Education*, 7(1), 10-18.

INTRODUCTION

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a methodological approach that focuses on the systematic study of talk-in-interaction. Originating from the work of Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson (Peräkylä, 2004), CA seeks to understand how participants organize their speech and actions to create meaningful, coherent communication. Unlike approaches that analyze language solely through grammatical or structural features, CA views conversation as a collaborative process where speakers actively co-construct meaning (Wagner & Park, 2022). Every pause, overlap, intonation shift, and sequence of turns is treated as significant because it reflects how participants manage social relationships, negotiate roles, and interpret each other's intentions (Sidnell & Stivers, 2012). CA therefore provides an in-depth understanding of how interaction unfolds in real time.

In political discourse, CA becomes especially valuable because interactions between leaders are often scripted yet strategically flexible. Political figures such as Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky rely not only on the content of their messages, but also on how those messages are delivered, responded to, and sequenced. Turn-taking practices, for instance, can reveal levels of assertiveness or deference (Schegloff, 2007), while adjacency pairs, such as question-answer or request-acceptance sequences, can expose patterns of cooperation or subtle resistance (Heritage & Clayman, 2011). Repair mechanisms, where speakers correct or modify their statements, may indicate attempts to maintain face, avoid conflict, or signal diplomatic sensitivity (Schegloff, 1992). By analyzing these micro-level features, CA helps uncover the interactional strategies employed by political leaders during high-stakes diplomatic encounters.

Moreover, CA emphasizes the importance of context, but it treats context as something created within the conversation itself rather than imposed externally (Godwin-Jones et al., 2023). Participants display their

understanding of the situation through their linguistic choices, which allows analysts to infer power relations, institutional roles, and shared expectations directly from the interaction. This perspective aligns well with ethnographic frameworks like Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model, which accounts for broader sociocultural factors surrounding communication (Hymes, 1971; Saville-Troike, 2003). By integrating CA with the SPEAKING model, researchers can examine not only how Trump and Zelensky organize their talk, but also how their conversation is shaped by setting, political goals, cultural norms, and diplomatic protocols. This combined approach provides a more holistic understand.

Communication lies at the heart of human interaction, shaping social relations, influencing power dynamics, and constructing cultural meanings. In political settings, communication is not merely a tool for information exchange but a complex performance embedded in cultural, social, and ideological contexts (Van Dijk, 2023). Political discourse, especially at the international level, functions as a stage for identity construction, persuasion, and the negotiation of meaning. The ethnography of communication (EoC) offers a powerful lens to examine these dynamics by focusing on how communicative events reflect the norms and values of particular speech communities (Saville-Troike, 2003).

Developed by Dell Hymes in the 1960s and expanded through sociolinguistic and anthropological research, the ethnography of communication investigates how language use is influenced by social structures, cultural norms, and situational contexts. Hymes introduced the SPEAKING model, which is an acronym for Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre as a framework to analyze communicative events holistically (Hymes, 1971). Through this model, researchers can uncover how meaning, intention, and power operate in speech events that go beyond literal language use.

The meeting between former U.S. President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House presents a compelling case for such analysis. This encounter, which attracted global attention, was marked by strategic language use, varying degrees of politeness, and implicit negotiation of political alignment. Analyzing this event through Hymes' SPEAKING model allows for a deeper understanding of how communication constructs political identity and power relations within intercultural and diplomatic contexts.

Political communication operates as both a symbolic and pragmatic practice. It involves not only the exchange of ideas but also the management of impressions, authority, and face (Scollon et al., 2011). In the Trump–Zelensky interaction, both leaders engaged in verbal strategies shaped by their cultural backgrounds and political motivations. Trump's direct and assertive style contrasted with Zelensky's deferential yet strategic responses, reflecting different communication norms and power positions. Such differences align with Scollon et al. (2011) view that intercultural communication often reveals how cultural values, such as hierarchy and solidarity, are expressed through discourse.

From an ethnographic perspective, the communicative event between Trump and Zelensky can be understood as a culturally situated performance. Each element of the SPEAKING model reveals aspects of the sociopolitical context and the setting of the White House as a symbol of power, the participants as representatives of nations, and the ends as both diplomatic negotiation and public performance. The act sequence of their exchange, particularly the tension between assertiveness and politeness, exemplifies how linguistic choices serve ideological and relational purposes (Van Dijk, 2021).

Furthermore, EoC emphasizes that communication is patterned and culturally meaningful. It highlights how speech acts, turn-taking, and even silence function according to shared norms within a speech community (Duranti, 1997). By applying Hymes' framework to this political interaction, the study moves beyond textual analysis to uncover how communication reflects power asymmetry, cultural differences, and strategic language behavior in diplomatic discourse.

The analysis also draws from critical discourse perspectives that link communication with ideology and dominance. According to Van Dijk (2023), discourse in political contexts often embodies implicit ideologies and serves to maintain or challenge existing power structures. Through EoC, this research bridges micro-level linguistic analysis with macro-level social interpretation, providing a comprehensive understanding of how discourse functions as both a cultural and political act.

In addition, this study contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation about language and globalization. Political meetings today are performed under global media visibility, where every utterance is scrutinized and reinterpreted by international audiences (Fairclough, 2020). The ethnography of communication, therefore, offers a way to analyze not only the interaction between two leaders but also the broader sociocultural meanings that emerge when national identities and communicative norms intersect in global discourse.

The relevance of this study extends to the field of applied linguistics and intercultural communication studies. By analyzing the Trump–Zelensky meeting, the research highlights how communication competence in international contexts involves sensitivity to cultural norms, awareness of audience, and mastery of pragmatic strategies (Nasution et al., 2025). This ethnographic approach can be applied to educational, political, and media settings to understand how communication shapes relationships across cultural and ideological boundaries.

Ultimately, this research underscores the enduring significance of Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication in analyzing contemporary discourse. Even in the digital and globalized age, Hymes' framework remains a vital tool for uncovering how communication operates as a form of cultural practice, political performance, and meaning-making process. The Trump–Zelensky meeting, as a communicative event, provides a rich context for examining how speech reflects and constructs power, culture, and diplomacy in the modern world.

Conversation Analysis (CA)

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a methodological approach that examines the structure of talk-in-interaction by focusing on how participants co-construct meaning through turn-taking, sequence organization, repair, and actions (Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell & Stivers, 2012). CA considers talk as orderly, systematic, and context-shaped while simultaneously context-renewing. The foundational work by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) introduced the turn-taking model, demonstrating that conversation is cooperatively managed through transition relevance places (TRPs) where speakers may take or yield turns.

In political interactions, CA is especially relevant because power relations can be observed through interactional practices such as interruptions, withholding responses, extended turns, and topic control (Heritage & Clayman, 2011). Dominant speakers typically use long turns, evaluations, directives, and strategic interruptions to shape the trajectory of talk (Bull & Fetzer, 2010). These practices allow CA to reveal how institutional actors enact authority in public contexts, including press conferences and diplomatic meetings.

Ethnography of Communication and Dell Hymes' SPEAKING Model

The Ethnography of Communication, introduced by Hymes (1962, 1974), examines communication as a culturally situated practice. Hymes argues that speech must be understood not only through linguistic form but also through participants' roles, goals, norms, and social context. His SPEAKING model – Setting, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre – provides a systematic framework for describing communicative events.

The SPEAKING model is widely used in studies of intercultural and political communication because it highlights how communicative behavior is shaped by institutional roles, cultural expectations, and sociopolitical motivations (Nasution, 2024). In political diplomacy, the model is effective for analyzing how presidents, diplomats, and government officials frame messages in ways that align with national interests, public image, and power negotiations. Integrating SPEAKING with CA allows a researcher to account for both micro-level conversational structures and macro-level sociocultural influences.

Political Discourse and Power Relations

Political discourse involves the strategic use of language by political actors to influence public perception, negotiate roles, and legitimize authority (Van Dijk & van Dijk, 1997). Power in political discourse is often enacted through linguistic choices such as evaluative statements, directives, moral judgments, and dominance of speaking turns (Fairclough, 2015). According to van Dijk (2006), political elites often use discourse to reinforce ideological positions and hierarchical relationships.

Interruptions are particularly significant in political discourse, as they may serve to control the conversation, challenge opponents, or assert higher social status (Nasution et al., 2024). Similarly, tone, or “key,” in Hymes' terms, affects how messages are interpreted. Hostile or authoritative tone can index dominance, while polite or defensive tone often indicates a lower-status participant (Heritage & Clayman, 2011). Thus, examining tone and interruption patterns helps reveal the underlying power dynamics of political interactions.

Combining CA and SPEAKING in Political Interaction Studies

Recent research has shown that combining CA and the Ethnography of Communication allows for a more comprehensive analysis of political encounters. CA provides insights into how interaction is sequentially organized, while SPEAKING explains why participants behave in certain ways given their roles, goals, and cultural expectations (Fitch & Sanders, 2004).

Studies integrating both frameworks show that political conversations often exhibit asymmetrical patterns: leaders with higher institutional authority generally take longer turns, interrupt more frequently, and use direct or evaluative language (Mey, 2001). Meanwhile, less powerful participants tend to use alignment markers, hesitations, and polite forms to maintain diplomatic face.

This combined approach is particularly useful for analyzing confrontational or high-stakes diplomatic talk, such as press conferences, negotiations, or crisis communication. It reveals not only how dominance is enacted (through CA features like interruptions and turn-taking) but also why it occurs (through SPEAKING elements like participants' roles, goals, and norms of diplomatic behavior).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach within the framework of ethnography of communication to analyze the communication behavior demonstrated in the Trump–Zelensky meeting: Full Fiery Exchange at White House video. Qualitative descriptive research seeks to understand social phenomena and describe meanings, contexts, and processes through words rather than numerical data (Cresswell & Clark, 2015). In this research, the focus is to describe the elements of Dell Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING model such as Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre as realized in the interaction between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky during the White House meeting.

The study applies Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication as the main theoretical lens, which aims to explore how language operates as a cultural and communicative system (Saville-Troike, 2003). Ethnography of communication views communication as situated in social contexts that reflect the norms, values, and identities of participants (Scollon et al., 2011). Thus, analyzing this exchange between two world leaders provides insight into how political discourse, power, and politeness are negotiated across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The primary data of this research were taken from a YouTube video titled Trump, Zelensky Meeting: Full Fiery Exchange at White House, uploaded in 2025. This version was selected because it represents how digital audiences currently encounter and interpret the interaction, thus aligning with the ethnographic interest in communication as it is mediated and contextualized through online platforms.

Data were collected through observation and documentation. The researcher repeatedly viewed the video to identify verbal and non-verbal cues, speech patterns, and contextual factors influencing the interaction. Field notes were taken to document communicative events, while transcripts were created manually to ensure accuracy in capturing utterances, tone, gestures, and turn-taking (Spradley, 2016).

After the transcription process, the data were analyzed using Hymes' SPEAKING framework. Each element of the model was applied systematically to the transcript:

- 1) Setting and Scene (S) to describe the physical and psychological environment of the event;
- 2) Participants (P) to identify the communicators and their roles;
- 3) Ends (E) to interpret the goals and expected outcomes;
- 4) Act Sequence (A) to map the order of speech acts;
- 5) Key (K) to observe tone and manner;
- 6) Instrumentalities (I) to identify linguistic channels or codes;
- 7) Norms (N) to assess conventions of interaction; and
- 8) Genre (G) to determine the type of speech event.

The interpretation was conducted qualitatively by connecting these communicative components to their social and cultural meanings. The analysis also considered the broader sociopolitical context and media framing surrounding the Trump–Zelensky interaction as presented in the 2025 upload. Finally, the results were described narratively to reflect how communicative behavior in this political setting embodies both intercultural and power-related dimensions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal how communication between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky during their White House meeting reflects both the structural organization of interaction and the sociocultural dynamics embedded in political discourse. By examining the recorded exchange through Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model and Conversation Analysis (CA), the researcher identified key patterns that highlight not only what the leaders said, but also how their communicative choices were shaped by institutional roles, power relations, and diplomatic expectations. These findings demonstrate that language used in high-level political encounters is deeply influenced by context, purpose, and participants' identities.

The analysis also shows that the communicative behavior displayed in the interaction operates on two interconnected levels. At the micro-interactional level, features such as turn-taking, tone, topic control, and repair sequences illuminate how Trump and Zelensky co-constructed their dialogue in real time. These patterns align with principles of CA, which emphasize the importance of conversational structure in shaping meaning. At the macro-contextual level, elements of the SPEAKING model, such as setting, participants, norms, and ends to reveal the broader sociopolitical forces guiding the exchange. Together, these two frameworks provide a complementary perspective that captures both the immediacy of conversational performance and the cultural and political factors that influence it.

Overall, the integration of CA and the ethnography of communication enriches the interpretation of this political encounter. The findings highlight how the White House meeting functions not only as a communicative

event but also as a symbolic representation of international relations and leadership styles. Before detailing the results of the analysis, it is essential to understand how the SPEAKING model operates within this context and how its components manifest in the Trump–Zelensky interaction. The following sections therefore present the analysis of each SPEAKING element and discuss its relationship to the principles of Conversation. The results of the study are presented in the form of tables below.

Table 1. The Turn-Taking Dominance (Overall %)

Speaker	Percentage of Floor
Trump	78%
Zelensky	18%
Vance	4%

Table 2. Interruption Frequency

Feature	Count	Percentage
Interruption by Trump	4	67%
Interruption by Vance	1	17%
Interruption by Zelensky	1 (minor overlap)	17%
Total Interruptions	6	100%

Table 3. Tone (Key) Distribution

Tone Category	Occurrences	Percentage
Hostile/Dominant	4	50%
Confrontational	1	12.5%
Threatening/Coercive	2	25%
Emotional/Polite/Defensive	1	12.5%

Table 4. Alignment/Resistance

Behavior Type	Occurrences	Percentage
Zelensky Aligning (polite, cooperative)	2	25%
Zelensky Resisting (counter-framing)	3	37.5%
Zelensky Blocked (no space to talk)	3	37.5%

These quantifications demonstrate clear asymmetry in the interaction. Trump dominates 78% of the total floor, while Zelensky occupies only 18%, reflecting a structurally unequal conversation. Interruptions also favor Trump and Vance, with 84% of interruptions coming from the U.S. side. Tone analysis shows that half of the excerpts use hostile or dominant language, while Zelensky’s contributions mostly reflect defensive or emotional responses. Additionally, 37.5% of Zelensky’s turns are blocked or overridden, revealing the limited space he receives to construct meaning. These findings collectively show that the interaction is shaped by power imbalance, aggressive tone, and institutional hierarchy.

Dell Hymes’ SPEAKING Model Analysis

Using Dell Hymes’ SPEAKING framework, this study examined the communicative elements present in the interaction between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky during their White House meeting. The analysis reveals how each element of the model contributes to the overall structure and meaning of the exchange.

S – Setting and Scene

The meeting took place in the Oval Office at the White House, a formal and symbolic place for international diplomacy. The scene was both official and public, since members of the media were present to record the discussion. This makes the situation both a diplomatic meeting and a media performance. The formal setting expected polite and respectful communication, but the conversation turned tense and emotional as the discussion went on. The symbolic nature of the Oval Office shows that this meeting was not only for private negotiation but also meant to send a message to the public both in the U.S. and internationally.

P – Participants

The main participants were:

- 1) Donald Trump, President of the United States, acting as the host and a powerful figure in the conversation.
- 2) Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine, acting as the guest and representative of a country at war.
- 3) J.D. Vance, Vice President of the U.S., acting as a supporter of Trump and a mediator who often joined the discussion.
- 4) Media or Journalists, who asked short questions and represented the public audience.

The relationship between participants was unequal. Trump and Vance had more political power and control over the setting, while Zelensky tried to defend his position and his country's situation. The presence of journalists increased the pressure, making the conversation more performative than cooperative.

E – Ends (Purposes or Goals)

The general goal of the meeting was to discuss peace and diplomacy between Ukraine and Russia. However, each participant had different specific goals:

- 1) Trump and Vance wanted to show that the U.S. was leading diplomatic efforts and that Ukraine should be thankful for American help.
- 2) Zelensky wanted to explain the seriousness of the war, the suffering of his people, and the broken promises from past agreements.

In the end, the meeting did not achieve harmony. Instead, it showed a conflict of perspectives with Trump emphasizing U.S. power and aid, while Zelensky focused on justice and moral responsibility.

A – Act Sequence

The conversation developed in several stages:

1. Trump's opening statement emphasized alignment with global peace but criticized Zelensky's attitude toward Putin.
2. Vance supported Trump by saying diplomacy is better than strong words.
3. Zelensky responded by recalling the history of Russian occupation since 2014 and criticizing world leaders for failing to stop it.
4. Vance interrupted and accused Zelensky of being disrespectful and ungrateful.
5. Trump joined again, saying that Zelensky should not "dictate" to the U.S. and reminded him of American aid.
6. Zelensky defended Ukraine's position and mentioned the country's sacrifices.
7. The conversation ended with Trump repeating that Ukraine should be "thankful" and that the U.S. could withdraw support if attitudes did not change.

Overall, the act sequence shows turn-taking competition, interruptions, and emotionally charged language that reveal unequal power relations.

K – Key (Tone or Manner)

The tone of the interaction was tense, confrontational, and defensive. Trump and Vance spoke in a dominant and commanding way, using a mixture of authority and sarcasm. Zelensky spoke with emotion and tried to explain the suffering of his people. The discussion lacked warmth or empathy, and instead became a verbal conflict. This key contrasts with what is normally expected in diplomacy, where politeness, respect, and calm negotiation are valued.

I – Instrumentalities (Channels and Forms of Speech)

The main channel was a face-to-face meeting. Trump, Vance, and Zelensky all used informal and direct language, which is unusual in formal diplomacy. Trump's speech used short, strong sentences and repetition ("you don't have the cards," "say thank you") to show power. Zelensky used narrative and explanation ("in 2014... he occupied Crimea") to give historical context and justify his actions. As journalists were present, the speech style mixed personal conversation and public performance.

N – Norms (Rules of Interaction and Interpretation)

Diplomatic meetings typically adhere to norms of mutual respect, politeness, and gratitude. In this case, the norms were repeatedly broken. Trump and Vance interrupted frequently, demanded thanks, and spoke in a confrontational tone. Zelensky resisted by defending his position and challenging their claims. This shows different cultural expectations: the American side expected visible gratitude and agreement, while the Ukrainian side expected understanding and empathy. The violation of norms resulted in a communication breakdown and public embarrassment, turning diplomacy into an argument.

G – Genre

The genre of this event is a political and diplomatic meeting, but it also functions as a press conference or media event. Because of the cameras and journalists, the participants did not speak only to each other but also to the global audience. This mixed genre caused tension: Trump and Vance used performative, persuasive language to impress viewers, while Zelensky used emotional storytelling to represent Ukraine's suffering.

The Relationship between Dell Hymes' Study and Conversation Analysis (CA)

Excerpt 1 (0:00–0:39) — Trump introduces the frame of the meeting

The meeting opens with Trump holding an extended turn in which he frames the situation by commenting on Zelensky's alleged "hatred" toward Putin and asserting that his own alignment is with Europe. CA reveals that this turn is long, uninterrupted, and strategically used to claim the conversational floor. Trump performs a framing action, positioning Zelensky as emotive and unreasonable while positioning himself as a rational negotiator. Preference organization shows that Trump's turn is not a response but a preferred act of self-assertion, allowing him to control the direction of talk. Through shifts in footing, he alternates between narrator and authoritative evaluator, asserting, "You're never going to get a deal that way." From a SPEAKING perspective, the tone (Key) is paternalistic, the Ends revolve around setting his preferred negotiation agenda, and the Norms of typical diplomatic openings are disrupted as he implicitly criticizes Zelensky. Together, the CA structure and SPEAKING components reveal an asymmetrical interactional field shaped by Trump's dominance from the very beginning.

Excerpt 2 (1:24–2:01) — Zelensky reconstructs historical grievances

In the second excerpt, Zelensky takes a long narrative turn after Trump gives him the floor with a minimal "sure, yeah." CA shows that Zelensky uses this turn to recount historical grievances, listing Russian actions since 2014 and highlighting deaths and territorial occupation. The turn includes minor self-repairs, which signal emotional involvement and urgency. From a preference standpoint, Zelensky's turn constitutes a dispreferred response because he implicitly counters Trump's framing without directly contradicting him. In the SPEAKING model, Zelensky shifts the Act Sequence from Trump's evaluative stance to a historical recounting meant to reframe the discussion. His Key becomes emotional and serious, and his communicative Ends involve redirecting the focus toward Ukrainian suffering and failed diplomacy. Overall, this excerpt illustrates Zelensky's attempt to regain moral footing, even as CA reveals the defensive structure of his contribution.

Excerpt 3 (3:05–3:49) — Vance delivers a face-threatening accusation

The third excerpt features a striking shift when Vance interrupts Zelensky's narrative with a direct accusation, declaring it "disrespectful" for Zelensky to speak in such a manner in the Oval Office. CA highlights that this abrupt intervention disrupts the ongoing sequence and constitutes a highly dispreferred response because it rejects Zelensky's account entirely. Vance's footing aligns him with Trump as an institutional enforcer, amplifying the power imbalance. Within the SPEAKING framework, the Participants variable becomes crucial: a U.S. Vice President correcting a foreign president violates expected diplomatic Norms and intensifies asymmetry. The Key is confrontational and scolding, deviating sharply from typical political politeness strategies. By combining CA and SPEAKING, this excerpt is revealed as not only conversationally aggressive but diplomatically inappropriate, marking a significant escalation in the interaction.

Excerpt 4 (4:07–4:33) — Trump intensifies dominance

The fourth excerpt shows Trump interrupting Zelensky mid-turn, delivering a direct rebuke: "Don't tell us what we're going to feel." CA analysis indicates clear overlap and interruption that an intentional breach of turn-taking norms used to assert control. The action is a dominance move rather than a negotiation, and the absence of repair confirms that Trump does not seek mutual understanding. His footing becomes explicitly parental and disciplinary. Under SPEAKING, Trump again violates diplomatic Norms that typically emphasize reciprocity and mutual respect. The Key becomes increasingly hostile, and the press conference Genre shapes the turn into a performative act meant for public display. This excerpt demonstrates how overlapping turns and direct imperatives expose interactional power, while the SPEAKING model situates this dominance within a broader diplomatic context.

Excerpt 5 (4:34–5:02) — Trump reframes Zelensky as powerless

Trump continues asserting dominance by telling Zelensky that he "doesn't have the cards," accusing him of gambling with lives and disrespecting the country supporting him. CA shows a long, uninterrupted turn with evaluative and moralizing components. Preference organization reveals that Trump delivers a dispreferred blaming

action as if it were preferred, further emphasizing his authority. His footing shifts into that of a moral guardian and provider (“the country that backed you”), enhancing asymmetry. From the SPEAKING model, Trump’s Ends involve reframing Zelensky as dependent, and the Key adopts a threatening, judgmental tone. Norms of diplomatic politeness are again violated as Trump imposes cultural expectations of gratitude on a foreign head of state. This excerpt illustrates how CA uncovers dominance mechanisms, while SPEAKING reveals the cultural framing of power.

Excerpt 6 (5:19–5:39) — Zelensky resists through counter-assertion

In this excerpt, Zelensky attempts to defend himself by stating that Ukraine is thankful and that he has repeatedly expressed gratitude “in this cabinet.” CA shows that Zelensky’s turn constitutes self-defence, that a dispreferred action designed to restore face. However, before he can finish, Trump interrupts again with a dismissive remark (“he’s not speaking loudly”), demonstrating Zelensky’s lack of conversational space. Minor repairs in Zelensky’s phrasing reveal his effort to soften the tone and maintain diplomatic decorum. Using SPEAKING, we see that Zelensky appeals to diplomatic Norms such as gratitude and respect, and his Key remains calm despite the confrontation. His Ends shift toward restoring cooperation rather than prolonging conflict. The combined analysis reveals that Zelensky’s attempts at politeness are systematically overridden through CA-mechanisms of interruption and dominance.

Excerpt 7 (6:31–7:04) — Trump produces a conditional threat

Trump continues to dominate, delivering a conditional directive framed as a threat—telling Zelensky that he is “running low on soldiers” and must “take the ceasefire.” CA reveals that Trump monopolizes the floor for more than 30 seconds, leaving Zelensky no opportunity for a response. The action combines warning, directive, and coercion. From a preference perspective, Zelensky is placed in an impossible position: the turn demands compliance and allows no alternative. Trump’s footing blends that of adviser, commander, and superior geopolitical actor. In the SPEAKING model, Trump’s Ends involve redefining negotiation as compliance dictated by the United States, the Key becomes coercive and urgent, and the Genre of the press event turns this into a public performance of dominance. The excerpt strongly demonstrates how CA structures contribute to power asymmetries reinforced by cultural and institutional factors described in SPEAKING.

Excerpt 8 (8:10–10:27) — Trump monologues to close the session

The final excerpt shows Trump taking a two-minute monologue that blends self-praise, historical reinterpretation, warnings, and moral evaluations. CA identifies this as a complete monopolization of the turn space, marking the transition into the closing sequence initiated solely by Trump (“I think we’ve seen enough”). No repairs occur, and the speech is linear and authoritative, signaling that the interaction has become unilateral. Through SPEAKING, the Act Sequence highlights Trump’s unilateral control over the closing, while the Key becomes triumphant and self-legitimizing. The Participants variable again reflects hierarchy: Trump positions Zelensky as a subordinate beneficiary rather than an equal partner. The Genre of political performance dominates, overshadowing diplomatic dialogue. This final excerpt exemplifies how CA reveals the structure of domination within the interaction, while SPEAKING explains how institutional and cultural power shape those structures.

CONCLUSION

The interaction between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky reflects how communication is deeply influenced by social, political, and cultural contexts. Based on Hymes’ (1974) SPEAKING model, the meeting can be understood as a complex speech event in which both leaders attempted to maintain a positive public image while navigating sensitive political issues. The formal setting and the presence of the media required cautious word choices and a polite tone. Both participants were aware that their conversation would be interpreted not only by each other but also by a global audience. Therefore, their interaction was characterized by a controlled atmosphere, diplomatic gestures, and careful linguistic performance, showing that meaning in communication depends greatly on situational context.

Together, CA and SPEAKING show that the interaction is not merely a political disagreement but a performance of power. Trump constructs the encounter as one in which the United States sets the agenda, defines the moral terms, and reserves the right to lecture, correct, and close the conversation unilaterally. Zelensky’s appeals to gratitude, diplomacy, and shared democratic values remain conversationally marginalized because the interactional structure itself prevents him from establishing an equal footing. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates how geopolitical hierarchy is enacted and reproduced through the micro-level organization of talk. The meeting becomes a public display of dominance, where diplomatic dialogue is replaced by political performance and where conversational control becomes a tool for asserting national power.

From the perspective of power relations, the analysis reveals that Trump dominated the conversation through assertive language and self-assured tone, reflecting his position as the President of the United States. Zelensky, on the other hand, adopted a cooperative and respectful communication style, using politeness strategies such as agreement, humor, and gratitude to maintain harmony. This asymmetrical exchange illustrates how power shapes communicative behavior, a notion also supported by Saville-Troike (2003), who explains that speech events often mirror social hierarchies and cultural expectations. The contrast between Trump's directness and Zelensky's diplomatic caution demonstrates how cultural background and political status influence one's speaking style in international contexts.

The findings also emphasize the central role of politeness and communicative norms in diplomatic interactions. Both leaders followed conventions typical of political discourse that avoided open disagreement, expressing mutual respect, and highlighting cooperation. These behaviors align with Hymes' (1972) argument that communication is governed by shared social rules that determine what is considered appropriate in a given community. The use of humor and positive remarks functioned as tools to ease tension and project solidarity, reflecting how participants manage their "face" in public settings (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Such strategies underscore that effective diplomacy depends not only on political decisions but also on linguistic sensitivity.

In conclusion, the analysis of the Trump–Zelensky meeting through the SPEAKING framework shows that language serves as both a medium of negotiation and a performance of identity. The interaction was not merely informational; it was a symbolic act of diplomacy and image management. By applying Hymes' ethnography of communication, this study highlights that successful communication involves understanding cultural norms, social relationships, and situational contexts. Thus, the ethnographic approach provides valuable insight into how language constructs meaning, power, and cooperation in political discourse.

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