Rhetorical Devices In Political Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis Of Donald Trump And Volodymyr Zelensky's Dialogue At WSJ News 2025

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes rhetorical devices used by Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky in their spontaneous verbal exchange published by The Wall Street Journal in 2025. This study aims to identify the types of rhetorical devices used by both political leaders and to explain how these devices function as instruments of power negotiation in high-stakes political communication. This research applies Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, focusing on textual and sociocultural practice dimensions to examine how language constructs power relations and social meaning. This paper used a descriptive qualitative method. The results show that Trump predominantly uses repetition, metaphor, hyperbole, and sarcasm to assert dominance and construct authority. At the same time, Zelensky employs rhetorical questions, rejection of imposed metaphors, emotional appeals, and ethical positioning to resist dominant framing and maintain credibility. Overall, the findings indicate that rhetorical devices play an important role not only as stylistic choices but also as strategic mechanisms for negotiating power and shaping social meaning in spontaneous international political discourse.

Keywords: Rhetorical Devices, Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Discourse, Donald Trump, Volodymyr Zelensky

INTRODUCTION

Political discourse serves as a fundamental mechanism for influencing public perception, establishing power dynamics, and shaping diplomatic engagements on the global stage. Academic scholarship consistently demonstrates that political language carries inherent strategic intent, functioning as a tool for leaders to sway audiences, validate their governance, and sustain control over narrative frameworks (Charteris-Black, 2018; Chilton, 2004; Wodak, 2009). Within the landscape of modern international relations—particularly amid ongoing geopolitical tensions—direct verbal exchanges among state leaders become critical discursive events that expose underlying ideological positions and hierarchical structures embedded in communicative acts.

A notable instance of such spontaneous political communication emerged on February 28, 2025, when The Wall Street Journal released footage documenting an intense, unscripted interaction between former American President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Their discussion encompassed American foreign policy directions, Ukraine's defense circumstances, and diplomatic disputes surrounding the persistent Russia-Ukraine hostilities. Diverging from carefully orchestrated public addresses or formal diplomatic communiqués, this encounter materialized as an impromptu dispute, rendering it exceptionally suitable for examining rhetorical strategies in real-time political negotiation.

Rhetorical approaches in governance contexts trace back to classical antiquity, with Aristotle's seminal work establishing ethos, pathos, and logos as foundational pillars of persuasive oratory (Aristotle, trans. Kennedy, 2007). Contemporary scholarship extends these classical foundations to investigate how present-day statespeople engineer convincing messaging through strategic employment of repetition, figurative language, exaggerated claims, and ironic expression (Charteris-Black, 2018; Chilton, 2004). Such linguistic techniques transcend mere decorative function, operating instead as tactical resources for establishing supremacy, consolidating partnerships, and neutralizing challengers. Within political communication contexts, rhetoric manifests as a controlling force—deployed to sway populations, regulate discourse, and manufacture shared understanding (Van Dijk, 2006; Wodak, 2015).

Examining these phenomena through Critical Discourse Analysis offers valuable analytical leverage. Fairclough's tripartite model—encompassing textual, discursive, and sociocultural dimensions—provides a comprehensive infrastructure for investigating how rhetorical selections interconnect with power negotiations and broader social configurations (Fairclough, 1989, 1995, 2003). This investigation adopts

Fairclough's analytical architecture to scrutinize how rhetorical mechanisms operate simultaneously as persuasive instruments in emergent political dialogue.

Existing scholarship has probed rhetorical methodologies across various political communication settings. Charteris-Black (2011, 2018) examines metaphorical expression, iterative patterns, and ethical framing as resources for leadership legitimation. Ahmadian and colleagues (2020) investigated Trump's communicative behaviors through psychological profiling, pinpointing forcefulness, spontaneity, and cyclical phrasing as characteristic elements. Steinberg (2025) juxtaposed Churchill's and Zelensky's conflict-era oratory, emphasizing Zelensky's affectively compelling diction and morally grounded positioning. Nevertheless, these inquiries predominantly address rehearsed presentations and single-speaker contexts rather than emergent interactional situations where rhetorical strategies unfold dynamically through reciprocal exchange.

This investigation seeks to catalogue the rhetorical techniques deployed by Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky throughout their WSJ-documented verbal encounter. Utilizing Fairclough's CDA framework to interrogate spontaneous political interaction, this study illuminates how rhetorical selections operate as mechanisms for authority construction and meaning negotiation within international diplomatic communication.

METHOD

This paper is examined through a qualitative descriptive method that investigates rhetorical devices in political discourse. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative research is a method that produces data in the form of written or spoken words and focuses on understanding social phenomena in natural settings. This method does not use numbers or statistical analysis, but instead describes and explains data in detail. Therefore, a qualitative approach is suitable for studying spoken interaction and conversational discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rhetorical Devices in Trump and Zelensky's Dialogue

The verbal exchange between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky, published by The Wall Street Journal on February 28, 2025, presents a rich site for analyzing rhetorical devices in spontaneous political communication. Throughout the 11-minute dialogue, both leaders employ distinct rhetorical strategies that reflect their communicative styles and political positioning.

Repetition: Asserting Dominance Through Reiteration

Trump frequently employs repetition to assert dominance and reinforce evaluative judgments. This device appears prominently when Zelensky attempts to warn Trump about the future consequences of the war. Zelensky suggests that because Trump has "a nice ocean," he does not currently feel the effects of the conflict but will eventually. Trump interrupts and rejects this framing through immediate repetition:

Data 1

TRUMP: *"<u>Don't</u> tell us what we're going to feel. We're trying to solve a problem. <u>Don't</u> tell us what we're going to feel."*

This data reveals an asymmetrical interruption where Trump cuts off Zelensky's predictive warning. The repeated negative command "don't tell us what we're going to feel" enhances strength and directness, marking solid resistance to Zelensky's explanation. In political speaking, repetition emphasizes the speaker's stance and attitude toward the issue being addressed (Atkinson, 1984). The reiteration produces an interpretive frame in which Trump's position is reiterated as the reference point, leaving little discursive space for alternative meanings. The repetition functions not merely as stylistic emphasis but as interactional control, preventing Zelensky from developing his argumentative thread and establishing Trump's definitional authority over emotional responses.

Trump extends this strategy when challenging Zelensky's right to define feelings or values. After Zelensky insists "you will feel influence," Trump counters through repeated denial of Zelensky's discursive authority:

Data 2

TRUMP: *"Because you're in <u>no position</u> to dictate that, you're in <u>no position</u> to dictate what we're going to feel..."*

This data shows Trump explicitly rejecting Zelensky's predictive claims by attacking his institutional standing. The cumulative effect of repeating "no position" strengthens meaning through recurrence, delegitimizing Zelensky's authority to speak about future consequences (Atkinson, 1984). This repetition helps Trump control meaning by reinforcing the same message throughout the exchange— namely, that Zelensky lacks the standing to define emotional or political realities for the United States.

Metaphor: Framing and Resisting Power Relations

Both leaders employ metaphor, though with contrasting strategic purposes. Trump uses metaphors to frame power relations as competitive games, while Zelensky actively resists these framings. When Zelensky attempts to explain Ukraine's historical negotiations with Russia, Trump interrupts to impose a gambling frame:

Data 3

TRUMP: *"You're <u>gambling</u> with the lives of millions of people. You're <u>gambling</u> with World War III."*

In this data, Trump rejected Zelensky's historical narrative by reframing his actions as reckless risk-taking. The term "gambling" comes from betting and games of chance, applied here to political and military decision-making. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors help speakers explain complex issues by linking them to familiar experiences associated with danger and irresponsibility. The repetition of "gambling" strengthens the metaphor and increases emotional impact (Atkinson, 1984). This framing simplifies complex geopolitical negotiations into a narrative of personal recklessness, deflecting from Zelensky's substantive historical points.

Data 4

TRUMP: *"You don't have the <u>cards</u> ... With us, you start having <u>cards</u>."*

In this data, Trump explicitly telling Zelensky that he lacks negotiating power without American backing. "Cards" depicts power as something grasped or owned in a game, implying Zelensky has no independent leverage. Charteris-Black (2018) notes that political metaphors simplify complex realities by converting them into common experiences. These metaphors present Trump as knowledgeable and strong, Zelensky as weak and dependent. The conditional "with us" makes American support the necessary precondition for any Ukrainian agency.

Data 5

ZELENSKY: *"<u>I'm not playing cards</u>. Right now, I'm very serious, Mr. President."*

In this data, Zelensky explicitly rejects Trump's imposed game framework. This explicit negation signals refusal to accept Trump's meaning. Rejecting a metaphor is a way of resisting the meaning imposed by another speaker (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Zelensky's addition "I'm very serious" underscores his rejection of Trump's trivializing frame, asserting the gravity of the situation against Trump's gamification.

Rhetorical Questions: Accusation and Resistance

Both leaders employ rhetorical questions strategically, though with different functions. Trump uses them to accuse and delegitimize, particularly when attacking Zelensky's gratitude. After Zelensky notes Ukraine has been "alone" and "thankful," Trump challenges this through pointed interrogation:

Data 6

TRUMP: *"Have you said thank you once this entire meeting? No."*

This data shows Trump interrupting Zelensky's expression of gratitude to deny its sufficiency. This question does not seek information but posits an accusation. The form presupposes the answer "no," functioning as an indirect attack while maintaining control (Ilie, 1994). Trump's immediate self-answer "No" reveals the question's rhetorical nature—it functions as an assertion disguised as inquiry, imposing Trump's evaluative framework onto the interaction.

Data 7

ZELENSKY: *"Please, you think that if you speak <u>very loudly</u> about the war, you can..."*

In this data, Zelensky employs rhetorical questions to challenge authority and resist dominance. When Trump and Vance speak loudly over him, Zelensky responds with pointed scepticism, as Zelensky was being interrupted and shouted over by American interlocutors. The clause "you think that" signals scepticism, implying Trump's behaviour is unreasonable. The use of "please" adds a sarcastic tone, weakening Trump's authority. This rhetorical question functions as resistance—challenging the equation of volume with legitimacy without directly confronting Trump's power.

<div align="center">

Data 8

ZELENSKY: *"Can I answer?"*
</div>

In this data, Trump cuts off Zelensky's explanation with "No, no. You've done a lot of talking." This question functions as a turn-taking device to reclaim speech rights following interruption. The request brings into focus that Zelensky can no longer speak, subtly criticizing the asymmetrical distribution of speaking time while maintaining surface politeness.

Hyperbole and Sarcasm: Intensifying Evaluative Claims

Trump employs hyperbole to intensify emotional effect and assert unilateral authority. When claiming credit for Zelensky's position, Trump exaggerates his influence:

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Data 9

TRUMP: *"I've <u>empowered</u> you to be a tough guy. And I don't think you'd be a tough guy without the United States."*
</div>

In this data, Trump claims personal responsibility for Zelensky's political capabilities. The verb "empowered" exaggerates Trump's role, implying complete influence over Zelensky's strength. This framing takes agency away from Zelensky while vesting responsibility in Trump (Charteris-Black, 2018). The hyperbolic claim reduces complex Ukrainian resistance to a product of American generosity.

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Data 10

TRUMP: *"But you're not acting at all* <u>thankful</u>. *And that's not a nice thing."*
</div>

This data shows Trump explicitly judging Zelensky's emotional performance as insufficient. The evaluative adjective "thankful" is used sarcastically—framing gratitude as performative duty rather than genuine sentiment (Dynel, 2014). The childish formulation "not a nice thing" adds a condescending tone, reducing international diplomacy to playground etiquette.

Emotional Appeals: Fear and Shared Suffering

Both leaders use pathos, though with different strategies. Trump evokes fear of abandonment to pressure compliance:

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Data 11

TRUMP: *"<u>If we're out</u>, you'll fight it out. I don't think it's going to be pretty."*
</div>

In this data, Trump is threatening the withdrawal of American support. The conditional clause signals uncertainty and potential abandonment, associated with fear-based appeals (Aristotle, 2007). The vague threat "not going to be pretty" amplifies anxiety without specifying consequences, making the fear more diffuse and potent.

Zelensky emphasizes shared suffering to construct solidarity and challenge asymmetry:

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Data 12

ZELENSKY: *"<u>Our people are dying</u>."*
</div>

In this data, Zelensky responds to accusations of insufficient gratitude by foregrounding human cost. The inclusive pronoun "our" creates shared in-group identity, inviting collective empathy (Aristotle, 2007; Charteris-Black, 2005). This emotional appeal shifts focus from Trump's transactional framing to humanitarian stakes.

Zelensky universalizes suffering to challenge power asymmetry when Trump claims unique problems:

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Data 13

ZELENSKY: *"During the war, <u>everybody</u> has problems, even you."*
</div>

In this Data, Trump asserts American exceptionalism; Zelensky responds by equalizing vulnerability. The quantifier "everybody" equalizes suffering across power inequalities, challenging Trump's framing by emphasizing shared human vulnerability (Nussbaum, 2013). The direct address "even you" makes Trump subject to the same universal condition he claims to transcend.

Ethical Positioning: Constructing Credibility

Zelensky employs ethos to construct moral credibility against accusations of ingratitude. When Trump denies his expressions of thanks, Zelensky explicitly defends his character:

Data 14

ZELENSKY: *"We are thankful... I said thanks in this cabinet."*

This data shows a direct refutation of Trump's accusation. Explicit statements of gratitude establish credibility through claims about moral character (Aristotle, 2007; Benoit, 1995). Zelensky's specificity "in this cabinet" provides concrete evidence against Trump's generalized denial.

Data 15

ZELENSKY: *"Of course we want to stop the war, but with guarantees."*

The context involves Trump pressuring for immediate agreement; Zelensky resists through conditional acceptance. This presents Zelensky as reasonable and responsible—willing to cooperate without recklessness (Aristotle, 2007). The contrastive "but" signals resistance within apparent agreement, maintaining agency through principled conditionality.

The Significance of Rhetorical Devices in Political Discourse

The analysis reveals that rhetorical devices function as strategic instruments for negotiating power and constructing meaning in spontaneous political communication. Trump's repetition serves to dominate interactional space, preventing alternative interpretations from gaining traction. This aligns with Atkinson's (1984) observation that repetition in political discourse fixes dominant readings and guides audience acceptance. Trump's metaphors—particularly gambling and card-game frames—simplify complex geopolitical realities into comprehensible competitive scenarios where he holds an advantageous position. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, such metaphors do not merely describe reality but actively shape how audiences understand power relations.

Zelensky's rhetorical strategies demonstrate resistance within asymmetrical communication. His rejection of Trump's card-game metaphor exemplifies Burke's (1950) identification through division—establishing a separate identity by refusing imposed symbolic frameworks. Zelensky's rhetorical questions function as equipment for living, providing audiences with interpretive resources to understand his position as principled rather than subordinate. His emotional appeals to shared suffering and ethical self-positioning as grateful yet firm construct what Aristotle (2007) termed ethical proof—persuasion through character demonstration.

The absence of logos in both speakers' strategies is notable. Neither leader employs structured reasoning, evidence, or factual claims to support positions. This absence suggests that in high-stakes spontaneous political confrontation, rhetorical strategies prioritize emotional mobilization, authority assertion, and credibility construction over rational argumentation. As Charteris-Black (2018) notes, contemporary political communication increasingly relies on ethos and pathos rather than logos, reflecting broader shifts toward personality-centered and emotionally resonant political styles.

The findings correspond with previous research. Ahmadian et al. (2020) identified Trump's use of repetition and negation to assert dominance, confirmed here in spontaneous dialogue. Steinberg (2025) highlighted Zelensky's emotionally resonant language, which this analysis extends to demonstrate resistance in asymmetrical power relations. The study contributes to understanding how rhetorical devices operate in real-time political negotiation, extending beyond prepared speeches to spontaneous interaction where power dynamics emerge through immediate linguistic choices.

CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky employ distinct rhetorical strategies in their spontaneous dialogue: Trump uses repetition, metaphor, hyperbole, and sarcasm to assert dominance and construct hierarchical power relations, while Zelensky employs rhetorical questions, metaphor rejection, emotional appeals, and ethical positioning to resist dominant framing and maintain credibility. These rhetorical devices function not merely as stylistic choices but as strategic instruments for negotiating power and shaping meaning in high-stakes political communication, with both speakers prioritizing ethos and pathos over logos. The study concludes that in spontaneous international

confrontation, language operates as an active mechanism for authority assertion and resistance, extending understanding of how rhetorical strategies function beyond prepared speeches into real-time political negotiation.

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