

Discourses on War in the 21st Century: navigating the linguistic landscape of contemporary conflict

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Abstract

This introductory article outlines the conceptual and methodological framework of the special issue *Discourses on War in the 21st Century*. It explores how language shapes, legitimizes, and contests contemporary armed conflicts through strategic naming, framing, and representation of social actors. Drawing on critical discourse analysis and multimodal approaches, the authors highlight how war discourse is ideologically loaded, performative, and embedded in evolving media ecologies. Key transformations include the hybridization of conflict, the erosion of wartime/peacetime distinctions, and the rise of digital counter-narratives. The contributions examine diverse global cases—from Ukraine and Yemen to India and Brazil—demonstrating how language functions both as a weapon of power and a tool of resistance. The issue calls for interdisciplinary research on the multimodal, transnational, and temporal dimensions of war discourse in the 21st century.

Keywords

War discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis, media framing, mediatization of conflict

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The 21st century has brought fundamental changes in the nature of armed conflicts and the ways they are discursively represented. From the September 11, 2001 attacks through the “Arab Spring” to the contemporary war in Ukraine, we observe the evolution not only of military actions, but above all of the language and discourses used to describe, legitimize, and understand contemporary conflicts (Chiluwa, 2022, 2024; Hom & Campbell, 2022). The traditional distinction between wartime and peacetime has eroded, giving way to the concept of “forever wars” and a permanent state of military readiness.

Contemporary war discourses are characterized by several key transformations. First, we observe a transition from temporally limited war narratives to ubiquitous, permanent forms of socio-political life organization (Hom & Campbell, 2022). Second, the development of digital technologies and social media has created new spaces for the construction and dissemination of war narratives, simultaneously enabling the emergence of counter-narratives and the phenomenon of disinformation (Ptaszek et al., 2023). Mediatization of war is sometimes called the third phase of mediatization, or 'arrested war' by Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2015) and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 is a good example.

Third, the hybridization of contemporary conflicts requires new analytical frameworks that take into account the multimodality of discourses and their transnational character (Nilsson, 2021). The analysis of 21st-century war discourses requires an interdisciplinary approach combining methods of corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, multimodal analyses, and new media studies (Macgilchrist, 2013).

Particularly important is understanding how different semiotic modalities - verbal, visual, auditory, and digital - interact in the construction of contemporary war narratives (Ushchyna, 2022). Equally important is the consideration of temporal aspects of war discourses and the ways in which past, present, and future are mobilized in the processes of conflict legitimization.

Language plays a profoundly strategic and multifaceted role in describing reality during times of war and conflict, serving not merely as a tool for communication but as a weapon for shaping perceptions, mobilizing support, and delegitimizing adversaries. The articles provided, forming a special issue on "Discourses on War in the 21st Century", highlight various linguistic characteristics and discursive strategies employed by different actors—from political leaders and media outlets to Indigenous movements—in diverse conflict settings, including the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Yemeni proxy war, and internal political struggles in Brazil and India. The language of war and conflict is characterized by its dynamic, deliberate, and often manipulative nature, designed to construct specific realities that serve particular political, social, or ideological agendas. The authors of the texts included in this issue describe these features of the language of war. They form a reasonably coherent story, illustrated from different perspectives. This is achieved through careful choices in naming, framing, actor representation, and the deployment of a wide array of rhetorical and discursive strategies.

The strategic nature of naming and framing

One of the most salient characteristics of language in war and conflict is the deliberate choice of nominations and the framing of events (Entman, 1993; Knüpfer & Entman, 2018). The terms chosen to describe hostilities are not neutral; they carry significant political and ideological weight, influencing public perception and shaping the discourse around the conflict.

- Diversity and contestation of nominations: conflicts are often referred to using a variety of terms such as "war", "conflict", "aggression", "invasion", "incursion", "hostility" or "crisis". These terms are "essentially contested concepts" whose meanings are constantly challenged and negotiated in political discourse.
 - The distinction between "war" and "crisis" is particularly critical. Referring to Russia's aggression as "the Ukraine crisis" (as was common in some Chinese and pre-2022 Western media) frames the events as a "Catastrophe frame". This de-agentializes the events, making them appear to be "brought about in ways that are impermeable to human agency" like a natural disaster, rather than an act of military aggression. This linguistic choice explicitly obscures the aggressor's role and can lead to weaker international responses or public understanding. In contrast, the Ukrainian parliament consistently uses "війна" (war) and "агресія" (aggression).
 - Euphemisms also play a significant role in attenuating negative emotions associated with war. Terms like "defence," "operations," "devices," "incidents," "incursions," and "engagements" can be used to normalize or soften the perception of violent acts. Similarly, using general terms like "situation" or "issue" instead of explicit conflict names can euphemize the severity of hostilities.
 - The choice of nomination can also emphasize the geographical scope of the conflict. While international law might define the "region of war" as encompassing all belligerent territories, parliamentary discourse can strategically narrow or broaden this scope. Phrases like "conflict in (the) Donbass" or "war in Ukraine" might frame the events as regionally contained or internal, thereby obscuring the aggressor's role and making strong condemnation less likely. Conversely, framing the conflict as "war in Europe" broadens the implications, suggesting a threat to continental stability and values, thereby mobilizing solidarity and justifying stronger support.
- Framing as a subjective representation: beyond simple naming, framing is a discursive practice of "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality" and making them "more salient" to introduce a "cognitive bias". This process is crucial for influencing public opinion, mobilizing support, and achieving political objectives.
 - Multiple, competing, and overlapping frames exist in political discourse. For example, in the British parliament, while "war" and "conflict" both evoke the "Hostile encounter frame", their use can subtly shift focus. Initially, "conflict" might be more associated with Ukraine, but after the full-scale invasion, "war" gains stronger collocations and is explicitly used to describe events "at the heart of Europe".
 - In the Yemeni proxy war, Houthi media strategically frames its own actions as "armed resistance" against a "perceived aggressor," while portraying the Saudi-led coalition, the US, and Israel as "instigators of conflict". This clear "Us versus Them" framing is underpinned by ideological motivations.

Construction of social actors: in-groups, out-groups, victims, and perpetrators

Language in war and conflict is heavily invested in defining and differentiating social actors, constructing clear in-groups and out-groups. This process is fundamental to legitimizing one's own side and delegitimizing the opposition, often by assigning or obscuring agency and portraying victims and perpetrators in specific ways (Trisko Darden et al., 2025).

- Binary opposition and identity construction: a pervasive characteristic is the creation of an "us versus them" dichotomy, which polarizes society and mobilizes collective identity.
 - Defining the In-group: language emphasizes positive attributes, shared values, and collective purpose. For Indigenous peoples in Brazil, their resistance discourse uses the possessive pronoun "nossos" (ours) extensively (e.g., "our rights", "our Indigenous peoples", "our territories"). This activates an opposition to invaders and reinforces a collective identity, framing their struggle not just for themselves but for "the future of all Brazilian and all of humanity" as a "civilising project". Houthi media portrays its in-group and allies (Iran) as "brave, winning the war, and becoming militarily stronger", while Iran is presented as "humanitarian".
 - Defining the Out-group/Enemy: opponents are systematically depicted negatively. Marine Le Pen, for instance, constructed Russia, China, the EU, and the USA as key social actors, purposely excluding Ukraine as a meaningful participant to reframe the conflict as a broader power struggle. Her discourse positioned the USA and the EU as "aggressors" waging a "cold war" against Russia, shifting focus from Russia's actions. Houthi discourse defines the enemy (Saudi-led coalition, US, Israel) as "aggressors", "inhuman and terrorist", "criminal", and "against peace".
 - Blame Games: A key populist strategy involves shifting or attributing blame to simplify complex issues. Le Pen frequently used blame games to shift responsibility for the war onto external actors like the USA and NATO, portraying NATO as a "gigantic machine for selling American arms". This diverts attention from the aggressor and focuses on domestic consequences.
- Assigning (and Obscuring) agency: the assignment or omission of agency is a crucial linguistic mechanism in constructing narratives of sexual violence that directly parallels war discourse. Perpetrator agency obscured: language can distance perpetrators from their actions. This occurs through the use of passive constructions (e.g., "she was harassed" instead of "he harassed her") and nominalization (e.g., "kissing" as a noun instead of "he kissed"), which emphasize the action rather than the agent responsible. In the context of war, referring to "the conflict in Ukraine" rather than "Russia's aggression" similarly obscures agency and responsibility. Attribution of responsibility: while in Ukrainian parliamentary discourse, "aggression" consistently associates with "Russia" and "Russian", in British discourse, "war" had a stronger association with "Putin" than "Russia". This subtly assigns primary responsibility to an individual leader, potentially decoupling the state or people from the atrocities. Foregrounding irrelevant information: media discourse can divert attention from perpetrators' actions by foregrounding their laudatory background information or achievements, effectively humanizing them and downplaying the severity of their acts.
- Victimization Discourse: Language frequently constructs a narrative of victimization to evoke sympathy and justify actions. Marine Le Pen employed a predication strategy by characterizing the war as "cruel" to evoke sympathy for Ukrainians while simultaneously focusing on the drastic economic consequences for the French population, portraying her as a defender of national interests amidst the crisis. Similarly, the Houthi mental model often portrays their side as "virtuous and victimized".

Discursive strategies and rhetorical devices

The analysis of war and conflict discourse reveals a sophisticated array of linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed to achieve specific persuasive effects. These strategies operate beyond broad framing mechanisms, utilizing precise linguistic choices to shape public perception and legitimize particular political positions (Molek-Kozakowska & Dragomir, 2025; Nohrstedt, 2016). Contemporary scholarship has identified several key analytical frameworks that illuminate how language functions as a strategic tool in conflict situations.

Wodak's comprehensive framework of discursive strategies provides a systematic approach to understanding how language constructs meaning in war discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The strategy of nomination involves the deliberate selection of names and labels that fundamentally shape how actors, objects, events, and processes are perceived by audiences. This naming process is inherently ideological, as it carries implicit evaluative judgments and positions certain interpretations as natural or inevitable. Predication operates in tandem with nomination by attributing specific qualities and characteristics to social actors or events, thereby creating a particular evaluative framework for understanding complex situations.

The French political context demonstrates these strategies in practice, where NATO has been characterized as a "gigantic machine" to emphasize its perceived mechanistic and potentially destructive nature. Similarly, the ongoing conflict has been described using emotionally charged terms such as "cruel", while economic sanctions have been predicated as both "terrifying" and "harmful" to ordinary citizens. These linguistic choices are not neutral descriptions but strategic framings designed to evoke specific emotional and cognitive responses from audiences.

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Argumentation strategies function to justify claims of truth or normative correctness, often drawing upon shared cultural values and assumptions. The distinction between European and non-European refugees, for instance, operates through subtle argumentation that presents assistance to Ukrainian refugees as "natural" due to Ukraine's European identity, thereby implicitly questioning the legitimacy of support for refugees from other regions. This argumentative strategy relies upon unstated assumptions about cultural proximity and shared identity.

Perspectivization allows speakers to express their particular viewpoint while simultaneously positioning themselves in relation to their audience. The strategic use of inclusive pronouns such as "our" serves to create identification between political leaders and their constituencies, establishing a sense of shared experience and common interest. This linguistic technique functions to distance speakers from opposing political forces while reinforcing their connection to popular concerns and grievances. The modulation of utterance force through intensification and mitigation represents another crucial dimension of discursive strategy. Descriptive terms such as "anarchic and massive" operate to intensify criticism of particular policies or phenomena, creating a sense of urgency and threat that justifies strong responsive measures. Conversely, mitigation strategies can be employed to downplay certain aspects of complex situations or to present controversial positions in more palatable terms.

Van Dijk's ideological schemata (Van Dijk 2007) provide additional analytical tools for understanding how ideology becomes embedded within linguistic structures to legitimize certain positions while delegitimizing others. The explicit definition of group membership creates clear boundaries between in-groups and out-groups through strategic categorization and polarization. Media discourse from conflict zones demonstrates this through the construction

of "Army and Popular Committees" as legitimate defenders against "the enemy" and "forces of multiple nationalities", thereby establishing a clear moral framework for interpreting ongoing events.

The description of activities serves to present in-group actions in positive terms while characterizing out-group behaviors negatively. Military capabilities are framed as "growing and developing" for strategic and defensive purposes, while opposing forces are described as relying upon "made-up excuses" to justify aggressive actions. The framing of counter-terrorism efforts as serving a "colonial project" exemplifies how the same activities can be interpreted through dramatically different ideological lenses depending upon the speaker's position and objectives. Goal articulation provides justification for particular courses of action by establishing clear objectives and purposes. The protection of civilian populations and the confrontation of external dangers are presented as legitimate defensive goals, while opposing forces are characterized as seeking to "escalate dramatically" and "legitimize war" for illegitimate purposes. This strategic articulation of goals creates a moral framework that positions certain actors as protectors and others as aggressors.

The emphasis upon norms and values reinforces group identity while delegitimizing opposing positions. Principles such as "openness and flexibility", "honor and dignity", and Islamic concepts of "justice, compassion, and human dignity" are presented as guiding principles that legitimize in-group actions while condemning out-group violations of these same values. This strategy creates a moral high ground that justifies resistance while delegitimizing opposition. Resource control and strategic capabilities are highlighted to demonstrate strength and resilience. The control of ports and airports, along with "evolving military capabilities", serves to project power and determination while emphasizing the opponent's use of resources for "pressure" and "manipulation". This framing presents material assets not merely as practical tools but as symbols of legitimacy and moral authority.

Political neologisms represent a particularly dynamic aspect of contemporary conflict discourse, as new terms and phrases are continuously coined to address emerging issues and shape public opinion. This "war on words" operates through the strategic creation of language that rallies supporters while undermining opponents, demonstrating how linguistic innovation serves political objectives. These neologisms often become embedded within broader cultural discourse, extending their influence beyond immediate political contexts to shape long-term understanding of complex issues. The integration of these various discursive strategies creates a comprehensive rhetorical apparatus that operates across multiple dimensions simultaneously. Rather than employing single techniques in isolation, effective conflict discourse combines nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification strategies within coherent ideological frameworks that present particular interpretations as natural and inevitable. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing critical analytical capabilities that can decode the complex relationship between language, power, and conflict in contemporary political discourse.

Language in war and conflict is not a neutral conduit for information but is deeply enmeshed in and reflective of prevailing ideological frameworks and societal norms. Through deliberate lexical and structural choices, discourse actors reinforce governing ideologies: for example, by labeling one side as "legitimate resistance" while portraying its opponents as "aggressors", speakers naturalize particular worldviews and marginalize alternatives. Moreover, the very language of conflict often normalizes violence, rendering extreme actions more acceptable or inevitable; euphemistic terms such as "collateral damage" or "peace enforcement" serve to

domesticate brutality and obscure its human costs. Historical and cultural memory likewise infuses contemporary narratives with moral authority, as invocations of past struggles—whether referencing to World War II are used to contextualize Russia's aggression, mobilizing strong emotional and moral responses. The concept of "ruscism" was introduced in the Ukrainian parliament to link the ongoing war not just to Putin but to deeper features of Russian statehood, culture, and society.

Ultimately, these linguistic features serve critical political purposes. Authors and political leaders employ discourse to mobilize public support and legitimize their policies, framing military campaigns as necessary defenses of shared values and collective security. At the same time, adversaries are delegitimized through pejorative descriptors and hyperbolic attributions, a strategy that erodes their credibility and justifies aggressive countermeasures. Media frames and repeated narrative motifs shape public perception by guiding audiences toward particular interpretations of events and actors, effectively steering collective sentiment and opinion.

Finally, especially in electoral contexts, conflict discourse is instrumentalized to advance political agendas and bolster personal or party reputations, with leaders deploying war narratives to project strength and resolve for domestic political gain. Together, these interlocking discursive strategies illuminate how language operates as a form of power in wartime, shaping not only what is said but what listeners come to believe and accept.

This special issue of *Language, Discourse & Society* brings together a total of fifteen contributions that examine the complex intersections between discourse, power, and society across diverse global contexts. The thematic section comprises six articles that explore how language functions as both a tool of oppression and a mechanism for social transformation in contemporary political landscapes, focusing in particular on issues of war, violence, and resistance through a variety of geographical regions and analytical frameworks. In addition to the thematic section, the non-thematic part of the issue features nine further contributions, including eight research articles and one book review. These works address critical topics at the intersection of language, media, politics, and identity, further extending the journal's commitment to exploring discourse in contemporary societal challenges.

Opening the thematic section, the first article by Viviane de Melo Resende, Yara Martinelli, and Bruno Marangoni Martinelli explores the discursive dynamics between far-right political violence and Indigenous resistance in Brazil. Their analysis focuses on how extreme right-wing discourses about Indigenous peoples and territories were challenged and subverted through Indigenous resistance movements, particularly examining the discursive production from Brazil's largest Indigenous conference, the Free Land Camp (Acampamento Terra Livre), from 2019 to 2022. The study demonstrates how Indigenous peoples assumed a leading role in social resistance against fascism during this critical period in Brazilian politics.

Le Thi My Danh's contribution examines the Philippines' strategic use of media diplomacy during the South China Sea arbitration case against China from 2013 to 2016. Through analysis of over 1,000 Department of Foreign Affairs remarks and more than 1,100 news reports, the study reveals how the Philippine government leveraged media tools and controlled relationships with domestic media channels to promote their legal case and manage pressure from China. The research offers valuable lessons for contemporary diplomatic communication strategies in territorial disputes.

Apurbalal Senapati's corpus-based analysis investigates political neologisms in Indian electoral discourse, focusing on Bengali language usage. The study employs a three-phase methodology involving corpus creation from political news and social media texts, systematic identification of neologisms using n-gram models, and socio-linguistic analysis of the identified terms. The research documents 327 new political neologisms, providing detailed examination of the twenty most prominent examples and their role in contemporary Indian political communication.

The fourth article by Olena Siden and Alina Mozolevska analyzes how Marine Le Pen utilized the Russo-Ukrainian War as a discursive tool during the 2022 French presidential campaign. Their examination of Le Pen's Twitter communication reveals how she employed crisis narratives to reinforce internal antagonism between "the people" and "the elite", while strategically shifting focus away from Russia's role as aggressor. The study demonstrates how populist actors exploit international crises to advance domestic political agendas through strategic narrative construction.

Anna Kryvenko's comparative study examines the discursive construction of Russia's aggression in Ukrainian and British parliamentary discourse from 2014 onwards. Using a MD-CADS (Multimodal Discourse-Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies) framework, the research analyzes naming choices and framing strategies for armed hostilities in both institutional contexts. The findings illuminate how spatial and temporal proximity affects the conceptualization of conflict and reflects the hybrid legal-political nature of parliamentary discourse.

Finally, Fahad Salem J Alghamdi, Surinderpal Kaur, and Ayesah Syed investigate the discourse strategies employed by Houthis in their Al Masirah media coverage of the Yemeni proxy war. Through thematic analysis of sixteen news articles published between April 2018 and March 2019, the study reveals how Houthi discourse legitimizes collaboration with Iran while simultaneously delegitimizing the Saudi-led coalition and the ousted Yemeni government. The research uncovers the strategic emphasis on armed resistance as a response to perceived aggression, contributing to understanding of power dynamics in Middle Eastern conflicts.

Opening the non-thematic section, the article by Joanna Zhuoan Chen and Molly Xie Pan present a comparative corpus-assisted analysis of media coverage of the Fukushima nuclear wastewater release in China and Japan. Drawing on news corpora from *China Daily* and *The Japan Times*, the study reveals how national media frame the same event through divergent lexical and metaphorical strategies, reflecting ideological and geopolitical tensions in the region.

Yuliia Mostova examines gender bias in Czech media discourse on female politicians through a content analysis of newspaper headlines. Her study reveals the persistence of stereotypes and double standards that marginalize women in politics, and argues for more inclusive language practices to support gender equity in political representation.

Veronika Papyrina investigates the linguistic features of 2020 U.S. presidential campaign ads using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) tool. Her analysis identifies a contrast between the Republican Party's more analytic and negatively toned rhetoric and the Democratic Party's discourse characterized by cognitive engagement and authenticity, highlighting deeper ideological divisions in American political messaging.

In a discourse-oriented case study, Maen Saa examines Jeremy Corbyn's pre-election interviews, focusing on his use of the epistemic phrase *I think*. Drawing on sociolinguistic theories of identity and indexicality, the study illustrates how Corbyn constructs an image of authenticity rooted in personal conviction and consistency between values and political discourse.

Sharon Wilson and Lim Shiang Shiang explore media framing of the extradition of Malaysian serial rapist Selva Kumar Subbiah. Using corpus and computer-assisted analysis, the authors examine how national newspapers and online user comments shaped public understanding of sexual violence, criminal justice, and safety concerns in Malaysia.

Badiaa Elharraki investigates the discourse of Moroccan women who experienced marital violence, as presented in the talk show *Qesset Nnass*. Drawing on qualitative discourse analysis, the study explores how cultural legitimation strategies are deployed by women to articulate their experiences and resist gender-based violence within the constraints of media and sociocultural norms.

Ali Farah investigates the construction of victims and perpetrators in U.S. media discourse on sexual violence. Using critical discourse analysis of online news reports, the study reveals asymmetrical linguistic strategies that distance perpetrators and obscure victim experiences, raising urgent questions about media responsibility in shaping public perceptions of sexual aggression.

Syifa Amelia and Ribut Wahyudi examine refugee self-positioning in educational discourse, focusing on a UN conference speech by a refugee representative in Mexico. Applying Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, their analysis reveals how refugees articulate resistance to systemic educational barriers and reframe public narratives through discursive strategies of empowerment.

The issue concludes with a book review by Roman Szymon Androszczuk of *Dictionary of Life-Saving Words*, edited by Michał Paluch. Rooted in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the reviewed volume brings together essays and key concepts designed to foster psychological resilience, intercultural solidarity, and human dignity in times of trauma. The review underscores the volume's relevance for educators, caregivers, and scholars engaged in peace-building and humanitarian efforts.

In conclusion, the language used to describe war and conflict is far from neutral. It is a highly strategic, ideologically driven, and performative dimension of social reality. It actively constructs realities by carefully selecting names, framing events, defining and polarizing social actors, assigning or obscuring agency, and leveraging a wide range of rhetorical devices and linguistic strategies. This "war on words" is designed to mobilize support, undermine opposition, and legitimize actions, ultimately influencing public opinion and the trajectory of conflicts themselves. Understanding these linguistic characteristics through critical discourse analysis is essential for decoding the complex interplay of language, power, and conflict in the 21st century. Understanding these linguistic characteristics through critical discourse analysis is essential for decoding the complex interplay of language, power, and conflict in contemporary warfare. Future research should explore the multimodal dimensions of war discourse, investigating how verbal, visual, auditory, and digital elements interact in constructing conflict narratives. Scholars should examine the transnational character of war discourses, analyzing how different semiotic modalities collaborate across borders and cultures.

Additionally, research into temporal aspects of war discourse—how past, present, and future are mobilized in conflict legitimization—remains crucial for comprehending the full scope of linguistic warfare in our interconnected digital age.

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