

Morphological Characteristics of the Diplomatic Language

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating certain morphological features of the diplomatic language. It is focused on the type of verbs used, the preference for certain types of nouns and noun phrases, and the use of pronouns in various types of diplomatic texts.

Key words: morphology, diplomacy, verbs, nouns, pronouns

This work aims at analysing the diplomatic language from a morphological point of view. Therefore, for the purpose of this work, we will begin by trying to define what diplomatic language, or the language of diplomacy, is.

According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, the online version, language can be defined as “the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other/ any one of the systems of human language that are used and understood by a particular group of people/ words of a particular kind”, whereas diplomacy is “the work of maintaining good relations between the governments of different countries/ skill in dealing with others without causing bad feelings”.

For the purpose of this work, the first definition of diplomacy will be considered, although the two meanings are intrinsically connected. If the second definition of language is considered, any of the languages spoken nowadays may be thought of. Most, if not all of them, have so far been used, in diplomatic dealings, but there has always been a prevalence of one or two over the others. In the past, French was the *lingua Franca* of diplomacy for centuries. Kappeler (1998: 49) notes that, for diplomats, French was, along with a good education, one of the requirements. French has lost this status in the first part of the 20th century; following the establishment of the League of Nations (the first international organisation to have English as one of the working languages), of NATO and of the

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Bretton Woods organisations, English has gained more and more ground in international relations. Nowadays, English has become more and more prevalent in diplomatic relations and, in general, in global communication. According to David Crystal, out of 12,500 international organisations active in 1995-1996, around 85% used English as one of the working languages and round a third of them used only English as working language. By contrast, around 13% did not list English as a working language, most of them being Francophone organisations. (Crystal 2003: 87-88).

The present work aims at identifying some of the morphological characteristics of diplomatic language. An initial stage of the analysis has highlighted verbs, nouns and personal pronouns as distinguishing features of diplomatic language.

The corpus was selected so as to reflect a number of situations and instances – from speeches held in front of a specialized and non-specialized audience, to treaties signed by two or multiple parties, and to span over a long period of time – almost 100 years, as the oldest sample dates from 1918 and the newest from 2013. The samples have been divided into four categories: speeches (W. Wilson: *The Fourteen Points*, W. Churchill: *The Price of Greatness is Responsibility* and *The Sinews of Peace*, H. Clinton: *Women's Rights are Human's Rights* and *Address delivered at the Women in the World Summit*, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer: *Opening statement at the Informal Meeting of Defence Ministers*, Ambassador Mark Gitenstein: *Remarks at the AmCham "Priorities for Romania" Report Launch*, B. Obama: *Remarks to the Nation on Syria* and Ambassador Martin Harris: *Remarks on the opening of Mass Transport Conference*), press releases (*Shanghai communique*, *Press releases of the US Embassy in Bucharest*), treaties (*The Six Point Agreement*, *Oslo I Accord*, *Dayton Agreement*, *Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the Accession of Romania*, *Agreement on the Settlement of Crisis in Ukraine*) and UN resolutions (*Resolution 242* and *Resolution 1441*).

Verbs

A first step was to conduct a quantitative analysis of verbs as compared to nouns in the four categories of our corpus, prompted by a remark of Basil Bernstein in Edelman, 1997:105) that “the percentage of nouns to verbs may be higher in a public language than in a formal language” and suggests that, if this is true, the former “tends to emphasize things, rather than processes”. Although a strict line cannot be drawn between one category and another, and our corpus categories cannot be strictly classified as “formal language” or “public language”, we have divided them, for the

purpose of our work, in “written language” (press releases, treaties, UN resolution) and “oral language” (speeches), and we calculated the percentage of verbs versus nouns in each of them.

The findings are very interesting: the oral language tends to employ a larger percentage of verbs versus nouns (11.43% versus 19.43%), as compared to all categories of written language (on average 9.1% vs. 24.04%). Therefore, using Bernstein and Edelman’s terms, it can be inferred that oral language tends to emphasize processes, to a larger extent than written language. Also, verbs tend to render the message more dynamic, to underline the call to action conveyed in some speeches.

The preference for verbs instead of nouns is another aspect that we have studied. We have already seen which category of corpus is more inclined to use verbs rather than nouns (speeches more than press releases, treaties and UNSC resolutions); we have now focused on material verbs with a positive connotation, as described by Ruth Wodak (2009: 200): “The use of positively connotated material verbs instead of nouns or nominalizations is also an important rhetorical device in political discourse because it conveys a greater sense of dynamism.” Indeed, we have found a number of instances when such kind of verbs have been preferred – Hillary Clinton speaks about *building a new democracy*, and about the potential of human families *to create a peaceful, prosperous world* about the positive effects created when women participate, and about the fact that Malala Mousafzai was considered by the Indian president “*a symbol of what India strives to be*”, Gitenstein speaks about *creating thousands of new jobs*, and Churchill mentions the need “*to secure the victory of a good cause*”; these examples can only support Wodak’s statement that the message is, by far, more dynamic, when employing such verbs than it would have been with nouns.

Other examples of verbs used with rhetorical purposes identified in our corpus are negative action verbs (Geis 1987:33) – *remove, prevent, deny, threaten, destroy, divide, ignore, violate* and fight verbs: *remove another dictator; take all necessary steps to prevent; these weapons could threaten allies like Turkey; destroy all mines; events too dangerous to ignore; we are willing to fight and to continue to fight.*

Voice

The voice of the verbs is very important for the message conveyed. Most of the times, the active voice is preferred, but there are some cases when there is preference for the passive voice. There are also situations when the agent is missing altogether, which can contribute to the vagueness and lack of clarity of the message. Churchill, for example, talks about conclusions that

may be drawn (by whom? Moreover, the modal 'may' adds further lack of clarity and precision), and about the settlement that *is needed* (By whom? By Soviet Russia? By the international community?); Wilson mentions that world institutions *must be created* (by whom?); Clinton speaks of the women *who are denied certain rights* – this time, the effect is not necessarily vagueness, as to who denies those women the respective rights, but rather emphasizes the helplessness and the status of victims (of the entire society and political system) of those women. A similar effect is obtained by using the agentless passive voice in the press release of the Diversity March, which talks about the LGBT population that *was harassed[...], treated as second-class citizens* – the absence of the agency conveys the idea that the agent could be a very large category of , if not the entire society.

Passive verbs tend to be far more frequent in treaties and resolutions – not surprisingly, as this has been identified by certain authors as one of the marks of legal language (Trosborg 2008: 200; Treibel 2009: 159) – laws *are adopted, passed*, the Israeli Government *is withdrawn*, redeployments *are implemented*. A special case of specific use of the passive voice in UN Resolutions is the construction *to remain seized on the matter*. This is the closing phrase for many, if not the majority of UN resolutions (with the version to remain actively seized on the matter) – it means that the topic might be addressed in further talks.

Tense and aspect

Press releases make equal use of past tenses (as they might refer to actions that have already happened: *the president was accompanied; the laws were passed*), present tense (in some cases, the current reaction to something that happened recently is meant: it is discouraging to see that the revisions were passed or positions of principle: *a basic tenet of democracy is, wherever there is oppression, there is resistance*) and future tenses (for mentioning events that are to happen in the future (or, on the contrary, that are not going to happen or are not expected to happen): *The March will take place Saturday; China will never be a superpower*).

In speeches in particular, in certain cases, the use of the past “is an instance of the distancing [...] Pastness, or distance from the here-and-now can be reinterpreted as distance from reality” (Partington 2002:149). *There were once great men in Germany*, says Churchill in his 1941 speech; moreover, he adds that once, *when the world had been faced great trials there was a generation that terror could not conquer and brutal violence could not enslave* – possibly implying that the current generation might not prove equally valiant and strong.

Apart from simply referring to actions that are going to take place in the future, future intentions, or proposals for the future (*we will continue to rally support* - Obama, *national armaments will be reduced* - Wilson), a special case of the use of future tenses in speeches is in future conditional constructions: *If women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish*-Clinton; *if we are divided, all will fail; the longer it is delayed, the more difficult it will be* - Churchill; *what kind of world will we live in if the United States of America sees a dictator brazenly violate international law [...] and we choose to look the other way?*- Obama.

Considering the more pronounced prescriptive nature of treaties, it is no surprise that the future tenses are prevalent here. Moreover, due to the special, partially pre-set structure of the UN Resolutions, this prescriptiveness is expressed by means of verbs in the present tense introducing each of the so-called “operative clauses”- (*affirms that; affirms further the necessity; requests; decides that*). The clauses that open the resolution are called “preambulatory clauses”, and they generally employ verbs in the gerund or participle (*determining to secure; acting under; expressing; emphasizing*). It is worth noting that these formulae are also used in certain treaties (*The Dayton agreement* opens with 4 preambulatory clauses).

Nouns

One of the first aspects that we have focused on is the countability of nouns. Geis (1987: 31) refers to nouns that can be used with both countable and uncountable meaning, giving the example of “revolution” In our corpus, one of the most frequent nouns used as both countable and uncountable is “people”: *people in their struggle; all the peoples in the world* in the Shanghai Communiqué; *ordinary people* vs *English speaking people* in Churchill’s *Sinews of Peace*.

Other common features are nominalisations, and proper nouns, more prevalent in treaties and UN resolutions than in the other categories of our corpus.

2.1. Nominalisation

Nominalisation, by which processes are described using nouns, is considered by Partington (2003:15) to be a technique meant to decrease the amount of information in a message, as it “removes the indications of time and modality that are generally present in a verb clause” (ibid). Goatly (2007: 330) argues that “through nominalisation we can metaphorically think of possessing actions, qualities, feelings, thoughts”.

We could also add that nominalisations could be preferred, at times, due to the lack of agent. For example, we can identify nominalizations in all categories of our corpus:

- ✓ press releases (the Shanghai Communique mentions the normalizations of relations five times and ceasefire three times, without mentioning who should be doing this),
- ✓ speeches (Obama speaks of military action, and about the use of chemical weapons; Wilson mentions the removal [...] of all economic barriers),
- ✓ treaties, even more frequently (The Dayton Agreement mentions the return of refugees and displaced persons more than twenty times and withdrawal more than ten times)
- ✓ UN Resolutions, more frequently (UN Res 242 speaks of acquisition of territory and withdrawal of Israeli Forces) - which is not surprising, as nominalization has been identified by various authors as one of the features of legal language (Trosborg 2008: 199; Chroma 2008: 325).

2.2. Noun phrases

One of the main features of noun phrases is that they confer brevity and impact (Beard 1999: 61). Noun phrases are employed widely throughout all categories of our corpus. Some of the noun phrases have remained in history (*iron curtain*, used by Churchill in his *Sinews of Peace*, has remained one of the staples of the Cold War rhetoric. In speeches, repeating the same noun phrase several times can have a very good rhetorical effect (Hillary Clinton repeats *a violation of human rights* seven consecutive times in the speech of '95 and *the right to* five times in her speech of 2013).

Partington (2002:13) mentions the technique of removing a quantifier from noun phrases (which renders the message more vague and imprecise. In Clinton's speech we can find *I have met with new mothers*, Obama says that *America has worked with allies*).

2.3. Proper Nouns

All the four categories of our corpus contain proper nouns. Most of them could be grouped into the following categories:

- ✓ geographical names, in particular countries (Great Britain, the United States of America, People's Republic of China, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Israel), cities (Stettin, Huairou, Kiev, Boston, Beijing) and other types of geographical names (Europe, the Mediterranean, Latin America);
- ✓ names of institutions (Harvard University, the British Cabinet, the Congress, Bristol University);

- ✓ names of organisations (League of Nations, NATO, World Bank, EBRD, IMF);
- ✓ names of political and military positions (Commander-in-Chief, President, Secretary General, Minister of Transport);
- ✓ names of persons (Stalin, Bismarck, Assad, Ramona Manescu, Luc Frieden).

A special type of such proper nouns consists in religious references, which can be found in many speeches. In *The Price of Greatness*, Churchill speaks about beating down *Satan*, and then ends his address by urging the public to thank God for the spiritual rewards He has granted [...], and mentions God as protector against totalitarianism – *God has willed that this shall not be*. He is not the only one to end his address with a religious reference – Obama ends with *God Bless you* and *God Bless the United States of America*, and Clinton with *God's blessing on you, your work* – or to use such references throughout the speech – Hillary Clinton speaks about *women's God-Given potential* and about Liberian Women who have *prayed the devil back to hell*.

Personal pronouns

Personal pronouns are one of the most interesting morphologic features of diplomatic language. In this sense, there is a clear-cut distinction between what we have called “the language of speeches” and “the language of treaties”.

First person

Speeches, in particular those held by non-diplomats, follow, to a certain extent, the rules of political language, in that they use personal pronouns extensively, in particular I, we, and you. Beard identifies four possible meanings of “we”, which we have adapted to our corpus and to which we have added a fifth possible meaning (ibid: 45):

- ✓ speaker + some other official (current meaning in press conferences/statements after a bilateral meeting)
- ✓ speaker + government/political party/institution that the speaker represents (*we know the Assad regime is responsible; we don't dismiss any threats* – Obama 2013)
- ✓ speaker + the people of their country (*In my country, we recently celebrated the 75th anniversary of Women's Suffrage* – Clinton 1995, *what kind of world will we live in [...]?* – Obama 2013)
- ✓ speaker + the people of everywhere (*we are the primary caretakers, however different we may appear* – Clinton 2013; *we live in a period so tumultuous that little can be predicted* – Churchill 1943)

These meanings are valid irrespective of the case. Obama speaks often of *our security, our democracy, our middle class* with the clear meaning of “American security/democracy etc.”, Clinton speaks of *our advocacy, our women* addressing to the entire world, whereas *our country* is used instead of The United States of America; similarly, addressing to an American audience, Churchill uses *our resources, our two Governments*, thus strengthening the bond with the audience (understood both in the narrow sense, of people present in the room, and in the wider meaning – people who read/listen to the address), or marking a “sharing of interests between the speaker and the audience” (Charteris-Black 2005:4).

Apart from the – more frequent – cases when “we” is used with the purpose of conveying solidarity (Wodak 2009: 79), we also notice the “quotational we” (Partington 2003: 62), employed with the purpose of representing what the other party is saying or thing (*There was no use in saying “we don’t want it, we don’t have it- Churchill 1943*).

There are cases when I is used, for objective or stylistic reasons (*I have met with women – Clinton; I sustain, I discern – Churchill; I will not put American boots on ground in Syria; I know Americans want all of us in Washington- especially me – Obama 2013*).

Choosing the singular or the plural form of the personal pronoun, Beard (2001) points out, may entail certain advantages and disadvantages. The singular form has the advantage of conveying the personal involvement and responsibility of the speaker, which might not be, however, a desirable effect if things go wrong. Using the plural form has the double advantage of conveying a connection between the speaker and the audience and of sharing responsibility, which, on the other hand, has the downside that the speaker will not get much credit if the respective measure is successful (Beard 2001:45).

3.2. Second person

The second person, considered by some authors to give a “more antagonistic” tone to the message (Partington 2003: 64), and on the contrary, by others as increasing “the size of the addressee” (Joseph 2006: 69) is used in speeches, but much less often than the first person (*I am here to tell you that; You cannot stop – Churchill 1943, to my friends on the right, I ask you; letters you have sent to me; many of you have asked- Obama 2013; This is the work before you – Clinton*).

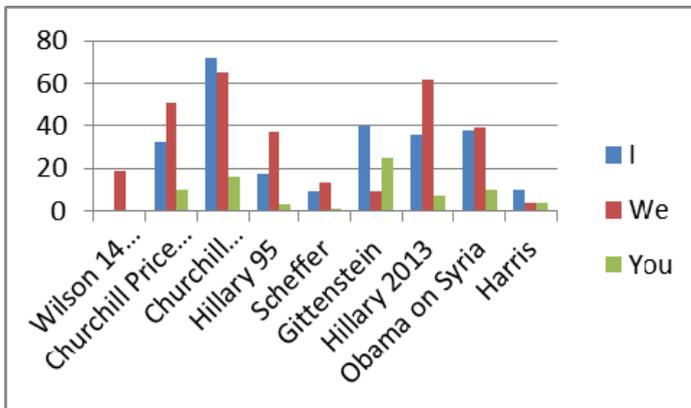


Figure 1: Uses of *I*, *we* and *you* in the corpus

The first and second person references are non-existent in treaties and UN resolutions. There is a very low total percentage of personal pronouns in these two categories, and out of the already very low number of personal pronouns, all of them are third person, which is not surprising, given that the language employed in these two categories has many features of the legal language.

Conclusions

Morphologically speaking, there is a clear distinction between speeches and the other categories of our corpora: verbs/nouns ratio is higher in oral language (speeches) than in the written one (press releases, treaties, UN Resolutions). As regards verbs, passive voice tends to be more frequently used in treaties and UN resolutions. Speeches, on the other hand, tend to employ what Ruth Wodak calls “positively connotated material verbs” to a higher extent than the other categories of our corpora. With respect to nouns, nominalisations and proper nouns tend to be a common feature of our corpus, employed in a specific manner in each category. They are present in certain specific collocations, sometimes they are used in coordinate pairs. In what concerns personal nouns, there is a clear difference in their use between speeches, on the one hand and the other three categories, on the other hand. Speeches tend to have a much wider use of the first and second person – with considerable difference from one speech to another, whereas treaties and UN resolutions only use the third person.

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Corpus (online resources)

Speeches

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http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp

Press releases

- Press release of the USA Embassy to Romania on the Diversity March*
<http://romania.usembassy.gov/media/dcm-06072013.html>
- Press release of the USA Embassy to Romania on the Anti-Semite Christmas Carol*
<http://romania.usembassy.gov/policy/media/pr-12122013.html>
- Press release of the USA Embassy to Romania on the Changes to the Criminal Code*
<http://romania.usembassy.gov/policy/media/pr-12112013.html>
- Shanghai Communiqué*
<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>

Treaties

- Dayton Agreement*
<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/dayton/52599.htm>
- Kiev Agreement*
http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/671350/publicationFile/190051/140221-UKR_Erklaerung.pdf
- Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the Accession of Romania*

<http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/b030326e.pdf>

Oslo Accord

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/middle_east/israel_and_the_palestinians/key_documents/1682727.stm

Six Point Agreement

<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook1/Pages/17%20The%20Six-Point%20Agreement-%2011%20November%201973.aspx>

UN Resolutions

Resolution 242

<http://unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/0/7D35E1F729DF491C85256EE700686136>

Resolution 1441

[http://daccess-dds-](http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/682/26/PDF/N0268226.pdf?OpenElement)

[ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/682/26/PDF/N0268226.pdf?OpenElement](http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/682/26/PDF/N0268226.pdf?OpenElement)