Ilka Gleibs   March 6th, 2025

How Zelenskyy's language strategy hit a wall in Trump's White House

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's clash with Donald Trump and JD Vance in the Oval Office on 28 February signalled a dramatic shift in America's support for Ukraine. **Ilka Gleibs** *explains why the language used in the exchange offers important clues about where relations between the two countries may go next.*

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his speech writers have employed a sophisticated linguistic strategy to build international support. Previous research I have conducted with Robin Bachmann and Lea Ruesch shows how language choices in his diplomatic communications reflect deeper power dynamics and alliance-building efforts during this ongoing crisis.

Yet, this carefully cultivated language strategy appeared to collapse during the recent joint meeting between Zelenskyy, President Trump and Vice President Vance in the Oval Office on 28 February. To understand why, it is important to appreciate the power of linguistic choices like pronoun usage in signalling shifts in diplomacy and policymaking.

"We" versus "I"

Across 202 speeches delivered to international audiences between 2022-2024, Zelenskyy consistently used collective pronouns ("we", "us", "our"; 3 per 100 words) three times more frequently than individual pronouns ("I", "me", "my"; 1 per 100 words). This "we-referencing language" serves as a powerful tool to construct a shared identity between Ukraine and potential allies.

This approach is exemplified in his December 2022 address to the US Congress: "*We defeated Russia in the battle for the minds of the world. We have no fear, nor should anyone in the world have*

it. *Ukrainians gained this victory… Americans gained this victory… Europeans gained this victory."* Through this rhetoric, Zelenskyy portrayed Ukraine's struggle not as isolated but as a collective victory shared by democratic nations worldwide.

The social psychology of strategic patterns in pronoun use

Zelenskyy's strategic use of pronouns exemplifies what social psychologists call "identity leadership" – the process by which leaders create and advance a sense of shared social identity. Research shows that effective leaders act as "entrepreneurs of identity", crafting a sense of "us" that mobilises followers around common goals.

By consistently employing "we-referencing language", Zelenskyy positioned himself not merely as Ukraine's representative but as a champion of shared democratic values across the world. Identity leadership theory suggests that when leaders successfully craft this sense of shared identity, they gain influence beyond their formal power.

Our analysis revealed that Zelenskyy's rhetoric followed clear strategic patterns in crafting identity through language: he deployed more collective "we" language when addressing powerful institutions like NATO, the EU and the G7 to bridge power differences and build solidarity; and increased collective references when speaking to geographically closer nations sharing security concerns.

However, institutional connections with distant powerful allies like the US overcame geographical separation. In addition, he adapted his rhetoric over time, with collective language starting at moderate and then moving to higher levels as the conflict continued – revealing how crisis communication strategically evolves to maintain international support.

When language strategy meets power politics

This success stands in stark contrast to Zelenskyy's meeting with Trump and Vance in the Oval Office on 28 February. The encounter revealed a glaring shift in power dynamics through pronoun usage.

Where Zelenskyy had previously succeeded in establishing collective identities through "we" language, the meeting was marked by confrontational "you" language from the American side. Trump's statement, "*You're either going to make a deal or we're out. And if we're out, you'll fight it out and I don't think it's going to be pretty*," clearly establishes a division rather than unity.

Even more telling was another remark by Trump: "*You don't know that. Don't tell us what we're going to feel. We're trying to solve a problem. Don't tell us what we're going to feel.*" Overall, in Zelenskyy's exchange with Trump and Vance, "you" was used almost four times (8.1 per 100 words) more frequently than "we" (2.1 per 100 words) or "I" (2.4 per 100 words) – an inversion of Zelenskyy's typical linguistic pattern.

The significance of pronoun shifts

Research on language psychology helps explain the significance of this pronoun shift. An asymmetrical increase in "you" usage often signals power differences, with those in higher positions using "you" more frequently to subordinates. Furthermore, "you-language" frequently indicates antagonism or confrontation, especially in political discourse, creating clear boundaries between groups.

This linguistic power play demonstrates how language can reflect and reinforce geopolitical realities. Zelenskyy's successful strategy of crafting collective identity through careful pronoun usage faces its greatest challenge when confronted with explicit power assertions that linguistically separate Ukraine from the United States in this exchange. The dramatic shift in pronoun dynamics during this meeting reveals how fragile linguistic bridges can be when faced with changing political winds – and how pronouns themselves can become powerful tools in international diplomacy.

Why this matters

These linguistic patterns reveal more than mere word choices – they expose the underlying power dynamics shaping international relations. For the international community watching this exchange, it offered a window into how quickly carefully constructed diplomatic narratives can unravel when confronted with shifting political priorities.

Thus, seemingly small linguistic choices like pronoun usage can forecast significant shifts in diplomatic relations and policy directions. By analysing these linguistic markers, we gain insight into how alliances are formed, maintained and potentially dissolved through the mechanics of language. The language of diplomacy – down to the level of pronoun choice – provides a warning system for detecting changes in international support that may precede formal policy announcements, making it an essential tool for understanding global affairs in real time.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Joshua Sukoff / Shutterstock.com

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About the author

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Ilka Gleibs is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science. In her scholarship she explores the themes of social identity dynamics, leadership and well-being. In her most recent work, she examines how effective leadership must look in crisis.

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