

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

UNPACKING DIPLOSPEAK: DIPLOMATIC RHETORIC AND COMMUNICATION IN
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
AUGUST 2025

ABSTRACT

“Euphemistic,” “placatory,” “Orwellian” – the terms often associated with the ways diplomats speak are hardly flattering. Perhaps because of these stereotypes, diplomatic rhetoric has remained underappreciated as a tool in a state’s foreign policy toolbox. My research challenges this conventional wisdom, showing that rhetoric is an important strategic tool that states use to communicate with each other. I use a mixed-method approach to advance a theory of state rhetoric that shows when and how “diplospeak” — the seemingly bland language of diplomats — plays a vital role in the function of international relations. Specifically, I use semi-structured interviews with both U.S. and South Korean diplomats to trace the process through which diplomatic rhetoric is drafted, edited, and disseminated on a day-to-day basis, showing that diplomats look to established conventions of diplospeak to signpost policy intentions. I then introduce two novel datasets of archival State Department press material, applying computational text analysis methods to uncover broad patterns in how states deploy diplospeak, showing that rhetorical patterns map directly onto moments of policy continuity and change over time. My dissertation therefore crosses disciplinary and methodological boundaries to build a theory of diplospeak that has implications for the growing literature on rhetoric within international relations.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the large community of people who helped this project come to fruition, both within the University of Chicago and beyond. Thank you to my committee chair, Professor John Mearsheimer, for your encouragement and guidance, and to Professors Austin Carson and Rochelle Terman for all of your help and suggestions. Thank you also to the other International Relations faculty and students who created a supportive learning environment, including through the Workshop on International Politics, where I learned how to present and critique academic work. Thank you also to my cohort, without whom I would not have even made it past Intro to Quantitative Methods, and other UChicago friends, including Elsy, Hope, Diana, Josh, Jongyoon, Minju, Adam, and many more. Thank you also to Mallory Brabrand for your fantastic coding and editing work.

I want to also thank all the friends who formed my support system, my Fulbright Family, and the many group chats and open ears that kept me sane through these years - Sam, Tamar, Mariam, Jenny, Katelyn, Paula, Areum, Ekat, Kris, Min, and more.

Of course, more than anyone, I want to thank my family - Mom, Dad, and Trevor, my aunts, uncles and cousins, Grandma and Grandpa, Nana and Papa, for all your love and support not just in writing this dissertation but for my whole life. I love you.

Finally, I want to acknowledge those who made this research possible, either through financial support or by lending their knowledge and expertise. Thank you to the University of Chicago Division of the Social Science and Department of Political Science. I was able to travel to the National Archives through the support of the Center for International Social Science Research's Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph Field Research Grant, and gained valuable language skills through the support of the Department of Education's Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowship, administered through the Center for East Asian Studies. Finally, thank you for the generous support of the Fulbright Program and the Korean-American Educational Commission, without whom I would not have been able to do a year

of field work in Seoul to support this research. I also want to thank all my interviewees in both the United States and South Korea who took the time to speak with me about their experiences in diplomacy and made this research so much stronger through their insight. Thank you.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Nor was I particularly interested in learning diplo-speak. I was there to talk about what needed to be done to solve the landmine problem. Period. As far as I was concerned, the only way to do that was with straight talk that would challenge the government types to respond in kind. I wanted them to shed their diplomatic armor and talk like human beings, or at least try sometimes.”

- Jody Williams, founding coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL)¹

1.1 Introduction

In March 2009, in the run-up to the first summit meeting between UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown and U.S. President Barack Obama, the White House made a seemingly crucial mistake. Speaking from the podium, Press Secretary Robert Gibbs dared to say that the two countries had a “special partnership,” a deviation from the traditional moniker of “special relationship.” Immediately, British diplomats and the press scrambled to find meaning in this switch – the word “partnership,” bemoaned the Guardian, “sounded rather non-committal – as if America were signaling that, henceforth, it wanted to be free to date other countries as well” (Burkeman 2009).

Conventional wisdom around state interactions might dismiss such a small swap of synonyms. Yet this incident is not unique – states regularly make diplomatic mountains out of the molehills of the most minor wording choices. This leaves a puzzle that has not yet been adequately addressed in the literature: If diplomatic rhetoric is just talk, why do diplomats seem to take it so seriously?

This dissertation puts forward a theory of diplomatic rhetoric based on the idea that diplospeak – the seemingly empty vocabulary used by diplomats – is actually a useful mech-

1. From her memoir, (Williams 2013).

anism that helps states communicate with each other in a clear, consistent manner. Despite the barriers to communication that are well documented in the international relations literature, states can indeed use rhetorical signals to facilitate the daily functioning of foreign policy. In short, my argument is as follows: Through continuous use of rhetoric in patterned, predictable ways, diplomats create linguistic conventions that help them send meaningful messages to each other, with or without explicit coordination. Using the linguistic philosophy of meaning-making as a theoretical base, I show that through conventional use over time, the vocabulary of diplospeak has become an important tool for state-to-state communication in international relations.

For rhetorical messages to be useful in communicating information between states, they have to be recognizable and intelligible to both sender and receiver. In fact, this is the function of language in communication in general – a language is fundamentally a shared vocabulary that conveys information that is mutually agreed upon and understood by those who speak it. My theory sees diplospeak in a similar way, as a language that diplomats become fluent in through their experience and expertise. For example, when speaking English, “special partnership” and “special relationship” are interchangeable; when speaking diplospeak, using the former to describe US-UK relations is unacceptable. Much like a “traditional” language, diplospeak has a recognizable vocabulary that, when combined with contextual and social knowledge, allows speakers to send mutually recognizable and meaningful messages.

If I am right that diplospeak works to facilitate communication between states, we should observe two key phenomena in state-to-state interactions. First, states will generally take their official rhetoric seriously, but they will take some words more seriously than others. Not all words a diplomat speaks on behalf of their state carry an established conventional meaning. In fact, part of the benefit of diplospeak vocabulary is that it helps diplomats cut through the firehose of rhetorical information that they monitor every single day. Second, the words that are taken more seriously by states when crafting their official rhetoric will include

symbolically important, socially constructed words and phrases rather than just those that are instrumentally useful in carrying out a policy (i.e. coercive or deterrent threats). If I am right that diplomatic rhetoric in and of itself contributes to state-to-state communication, we should see diplomats paying attention to symbolically important phrases in addition to threats, statements of resolve, or policy promises.

The rest of this dissertation will demonstrate that these two phenomena do hold in foreign policymaking. I do so using a mixed-method approach, combining the breadth of computational text analysis, the depth of American and South Korean archival material, and the policy relevance of interviews with former diplomats from both the United States and South Korea. With this data, I will show how diplospeak conventions form, how diplomats send and receive messages using this vocabulary, and how different types of diplospeak help facilitate communication between friends and enemies alike.

In the following sections, I delve deeper into the existing scholarly traditions that inform my theory, especially the philosophical work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and David Lewis on language and communication. I then discuss how this dissertation draws upon and contributes to existing threads of literature on rhetoric within international relations, specifically bridging rationalist work on credible signaling between states and interpretivist work on language and diplomacy as social practices. I conclude with a preview of the rest of the dissertation, briefly summarizing my findings that support the importance of diplospeak as a mechanism for meaningful communication between states.

1.2 Diplomacy and Language Games

The idea that language is connected to meaning may not be a mainstay in traditional international relations literature, but philosophy, especially philosophy of language, certainly has plenty to say about it. Many of the debates in that field center around the concept of meaning itself – is meaning the picture that appears in your mind when you hear a word

or statement? Is it the connection between a physical object in the world and its linguistic label? Is it the conditions under which a statement is true or false? In response to what he saw as increasingly convoluted attempts to philosophize about meaning, Ludwig Wittgenstein pioneered a different way to think about language, summing up his philosophy with a deceptively simple statement: “the meaning of a word is its use in language” (Wittgenstein 1958, §43). He dismissed the search for some sort of objective truth that language is meant to describe, and instead turned his focus to the social. In this vein, he introduced one of his most famous concepts: language games, the idea that people communicating with each other are volleying with each other in ways that follow underlying rules, whether we realize it or not. By describing language in this manner, Wittgenstein makes three clever moves that contribute to a more practical understanding of what we do when we communicate with each other.

First, he points out that language is not just a collection of words and their associated definitions. Language is, instead, a fundamentally social and relational phenomenon; the speaking of language is an activity carried out between humans Wittgenstein (1958, §23). Second, his concept of “family resemblance” helps explain the incredible human ability to make sense of an incredibly broad range of concepts within the conduct of daily life. Basketball, chess, Mario Kart – they are not the same activity by any stretch of the imagination, but they all share enough attributes in common that it does not cause any confusion to refer to all of them as types of “games.” This also facilitates learning and adaptation, and helps language naturally grow and evolve. If you did not know what a war game was, for example, you could extrapolate from what you do know about the concept of both “war” and “game” to come to an educated conclusion about the meaning of such a phrase. Finally, Wittgenstein points out that different contexts call for different language games – the meaning of a word in one may not perfectly transfer into the rules of another, even if they share a family resemblance in some ways. Through these three theoretical moves, Wittgenstein

establishes language as an activity that is socially enacted, that continues to build upon existing meaning, and that is profoundly dependent on communicative context.

All of this may hold true in a person-to-person social setting, but how does it aggregate to the state level? Can we think about state utterances in the same way as individual ones? And, just as there are some words that we instinctively know are particularly meaningful in a given context, are there diplomatic wording choices that immediately stand out to those who are fluent in diplospeak?

To understand the application of language games in a more strategic setting, I turn to the work of David Lewis, whose work takes the idea of language games and adds an understanding of coordination and strategy among game players. For Lewis, coordination around repeated behavior in a social setting helps us figure out the meanings of words and their use in communication. Lewis rejects the idea that conventions are just the result of hard-wired behavior – his version of conventions are coordination points that help actors choose from a range of perfectly possible linguistic choices. Conventions can therefore be instituted explicitly (i.e. through law, treaties, agreements, or, in my case, diplomatic protocol) or evolve out of unconscious coordination around meaning created through repeated social interactions.

“Lewis’s notion of convention allows for conventions that evolve gradually and tacitly as a side-effect of agents’ independent need to make their way in the social world. The first time we face a coordination problem, we have no choice but to do something. So, we do whatever occurs to us. But salience gives us a certain probability of success. It may be that what occurs to us matches what others do, because of natural affinities. Successful coordination creates a precedent that we can rely on in future interactions. Eventually we have enough confidence from our successful experience coordinating that we have developed the mutual expectations that constitute a convention. As long as agents are able to coordinate in particular kinds of ways, then the conventions are implicit in the choices they make and the knowledge they have of one another” (Lepore and Stone 2015, 320–321).

Think back to US-UK ties being described as a “special partnership” instead of a “special

relationship.” The problem was not that “special partnership” is an intrinsically worse phrase, the problem was that the two countries had developed a convention over time. When the press secretary deviated from established rhetorical expectations, it left diplomats and “special relationship watchers” scrambling to understand why (Burkeman 2009). There is no particular reason that the two allies should have initially chosen the phrase “special relationship” rather than any other similar options to describe their relationship. Nevertheless, the meaning of this phrase has now solidified because of continued use and mutual acceptance of the particular meaning of those two words used together in the context of the US-UK relationship.

As I will describe in more depth in the following chapter, iterated interactions and incentives to coordinate around shared meaning give diplospeak conventions their power, despite barriers to trust between states. In fact, some of this work on linguistics and communication has been incorporated into the study of IR, although it is still an area rich for more exploration. For example, Onuf (1989) put forward the idea that language as a game creates a space for social practice. Decades later, scholars have issued calls for more appreciation for Wittgensteinian philosophy in the practice turn (Frost and Lechner 2016; Skonieczny 2020). Some scholars have looked at how public language creates meanings and how actors, particularly states and their agents, use language to create change (Fierke 1998; Duffy, Frederking, and Tucker 1998); conduct foreign policy (Howard 2002; Skonieczny 2015; Considine 2015); or even construct understandings of the state of a bilateral relationship (Skonieczny 2020). Fierke in particular focuses on how language games can contribute to the scholarly study of language in international relations. She does this in part by moving beyond the typical question of the pure instrumental use of language in strategic maneuvering between states, to understanding language itself as a valid subject of inquiry for international relations in its own right (Fierke 2002).

To summarize – the specific context of an utterance matters deeply for its meaning, and actors coordinate around mutually understood meanings over time. This means that

diplomats become experts in the diplomatic language game as well as the various language games contained therein – the US-UK relationship language game, the North Korea-South Korea relationship language game, the human rights language game, etc. Once that context is established, they turn to their rolodex of known diplospeak terms, comparing an utterance to what is expected in a given language game. In an adversarial language game, for example, diplomats would expect a certain choice of terms and a certain tone. My theory therefore argues that just by strategically choosing to maintain (or break) an existing diplospeak convention within a known language game, diplomats can send meaningful messages to each other.

1.3 Rhetoric in International Relations

1.3.1 Trust and Credibility

In recent years, IR has begun to break down the black box model of the state that predominated the field for many years. Scholars have now explored the importance of domestic actors, especially leaders (Press 2005; Wolford 2007; Walker, Malici, and Schafer 2011; Hall and Yarhi-Milo 2012), bureaucracies and advisors (Halperin and Clapp 2007; Saunders 2024; Jost 2024), and to some extent general public(s) (Baum 2004; Baum and Potter 2019; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Acharya and Grillo 2019). Similarly, the field has opened up inquiry into the role of rhetoric in interactions between states. However, to the extent that rhetoric is taken more seriously in the study of international relations, it is still very focused on how rhetoric can fit into existing questions about conflict, credibility, and strategic maneuvering between states constantly competing for leverage against one another. This approach to signaling in IR therefore tends to follow a game theoretic model of strategic communication à la Goffman (1969). When actors, be they individuals or states, “exude expressions,” they often do so knowing that their expressions provide information to observers, and they may

attempt to control how that information is received and its subsequent effects on the standing of both the other party and the self. In this approach, individuals therefore do more than express information, they communicate it – and they do so knowing that they may gain some strategic advantage by sharing information in a certain manner. “Just as it can be assumed that it is in the interests of the observer to acquire information from a subject, so it is in the interests of the subject to appreciate that this is occurring and to control and manage the information the observer obtains; for in this way the subject can influence in his own favor responses to a situation which includes himself” (Goffman 1969, 10).²

In this vein, scholarship around the role of state rhetoric as a tool of foreign policy has focused on how states can share information to others in a way that provides them a strategic advantage, and how observers can strategically obtain information and act on it for their own advantage. Scholarship shaped by the likes of Schelling (1960), R. Jervis (1976), and others focuses on deterrence and coercion, seeing uncertainty about the intentions of other states in the system as a key issue that could spark conflict even if both sides would have preferred to back down. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the bargaining model of war emerged, laying out models showing that while hostilities can be inefficient for both sides (Brito and Intriligator 1985), information asymmetries can nonetheless lead states into conflict (Powell 1987; Morrow 1989; Banks 1990; Morrow 1994a); and later work including (Meirowitz and Sartori 2008).³

Fearon cemented the bargaining model of war in the mainstream consciousness of the international relations field with his 1995 article, modeling the perfectly rational reasons why states enter wars despite their high cost; once again, in this model, information asymmetries are one of the key factors that can contribute to conflict. Fearon went on to suggest

2. See also: (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Chatterjee and Samuelson 1983; Farrell and Gibbons 1989; Farrell and Rabin 1996) for economics-centric work on incomplete information and “cheap talk” in bargaining. See (Rapoport 1960; Schelling 1966; Raiffa 1967) for more on strategic interaction studied via game theory.

3. See also (Kilgour and Zagare 1991; Morrow 1994a, 1994b) for more on how information and signaling play into a game theoretic model of crisis bargaining between states.

some possible solutions to the problem of mistrust, namely that states can use strategies of tying their own hands or sinking costs behind a signal to prove to the other side that their statements are sincere Fearon (1997). These mechanisms for credible signaling have become the focus of a slew of work in the years since, with scholars focusing on the effectiveness of various forms of hands-tying and costs-sinking behavior (Yarhi-Milo 2018; Katagiri and Min 2019; Quek 2021), investigating conditions under which they are more or less effective (Trager 2010; Yoder and Spaniel 2022), and disentangling assumptions of rationality and how states interpret (or fail to properly interpret) signals, capabilities, and the likelihood of success should war break out (Morrow 1989; Kertzer, Rathbun, and Rathbun 2020).⁴ This includes a profusion of work on individual-centric and psychological approaches to rationality and decision-making among states and their leaders (Levy 1983; Mercer 2010; Hall and Yarhi-Milo 2012; Yarhi-Milo 2013, 2014; Kurizaki 2016; Saunders 2017). The literature has also recently begun expanding upon work on bureaucracy, delving deeper into how incentives and constraints shape foreign policy institutions and, by extension, policymaking (Feldman and March 1981; Vertzberger 1993; Halperin and Clapp 2007; Jost 2024; Saunders 2024).

Extant theories of rhetoric’s role as a signaling mechanism in IR can therefore be categorized into more or less three camps: 1) traditional (costly) signaling, which tends to dismisses rhetoric as a useful tool for credible signaling because it is not necessary and sufficient to send credible signals between states;⁵ 2) tying hands, often in the form of audience costs, which argues that there is a way to make rhetoric into a sufficiently credible signal by making a specific coercive threat public in order to activate another enforcement mechanism, namely public backlash;⁶ and 3) reputations, which also sometimes finds that rhetoric can

4. For an extensive overview of the origins and legacy of this line of work, see (Ramsay 2017).

5. See, for example, (Slantchev 2005, 2011; A. Kydd 1997; A. H. Kydd 2005; Powell 1990, 1999; Fearon 1995, 1997; Schultz 2001; Ramsay 2004). To be clear, it would be an oversimplification to say that game theorists do not care about rhetoric at all (Fierke and Nicholson 2001), but my point here is that they care about language as an instrumental tool that can (or, in many cases, cannot) be used to increase the credibility of a signal sent between states.

6. See (Smith 1998; Gelpi and Grieco 2001; Partell and Palmer 1999; Schultz 2001; Post and Sechser

be a useful component to credible signaling, but only insofar as it helps a state establish a believable reputation, usually a reputation for honesty or a reputation for resolve.⁷

In one particularly relevant piece that complicated this debate about signals and credibility, Katagiri and Min (2019) provide a different perspective on how the source of a piece of information can affect assessments of credibility. In particular, using a historical approach analyzing American assessments of Soviet resolve during the Berlin Crisis, the authors find that material signals did indeed have more bearing in American analyses than both public and private statements, and that ultimately, public rhetorical signals were the least helpful in conveying information. Katagiri and Min chalk this up to the relative “noisiness” of these different information channels: “Many studies on crisis bargaining assume that all sides are focused on a specific signal in question and have abstracted away the actual informational environment in which signals are sent—one that is defined by tremendous volumes of information and purposes, all of which makes it difficult to separate actual signals from the commotion of everyday governance... The ability to ostensibly tie one’s hands through a public statement is undermined by the higher degree of noisiness that public messages must overcome to be perceived as credible, or perceived at all” (156).⁸

2024) etc. for studies on the theoretical mechanisms behind tying hands; see (Slantchev 2006; Tomz 2007; Trager and Vavreck 2011; Tarar and Leventoglu 2013; Levy et al. 2015; Kurizaki and Whang 2015; Quek 2016; Evers, Fisher, and Schaaf 2019) for empirical testing of audience costs mechanisms through survey experiments or formal models; and for work taking a skeptical approach toward audience costs see (Snyder and Borghard 2011; Trachtenberg 2012; Gelpi and Grieco 2001; Downes and Sechser 2012; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Abitbol 2015; Kertzer and Brutger 2016). In addition, Fuhrmann and Sechser (2014) and Trager (2015) are some of the few studies that examines the hands-tying mechanism outside of domestic political audience costs, specifically through alliance commitments. There is some work on the role of private signals as a hands-tying mechanism in crisis diplomacy, such as (Kurizaki 2007).

7. See (Schelling 1966, 1980; R. Jervis 1976; R. L. Jervis 1989; Morrow 1989; Guisinger and Smith 2002; Sartori 2002, 2005; Wolford 2007; Sechser 2010; Tingley and Walter 2011; Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015; Yarhi-Milo 2018). Recent work on reputation for resolve in particular includes (Tang 2005; Wolford 2014; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017; Lupton 2020; Wayne et al. 2024).

8. Finel and Lord (1999) also focus on the “noisiness” of diplomatic signals, particularly from domestic voices, to show how increased transparency can paradoxically create more confusion and therefore opportunity for conflict. Jones and Baumgartner (2005) also examine “noisiness” within an American politics context, showing how domestic institutions input, assess, and act upon an influx of outside information, a process that incentivizes a maintenance of the status quo.

Interestingly, this concern over noisiness actually plays directly into my theory of how linguistic conventions help states communicate. Katagiri and Min are correct that public statements are so commonplace and varied that they become overwhelming rather than informative, especially if one is trying to assess the credibility of a specific signal from an opponent. However, this is precisely why, especially in more quotidian settings, diplomats do not look at all messages in a vacuum to make their assessments; diplospeak vocabulary and established conventions around specific words and phrases give them key focal points that help them cut through the noise to make meaning out of even public messages from their counterparts. In subsequent chapters, I discuss both the process through which these conventions emerge and why diplomats find them useful as tools to keep track of the state of play on specific policy issues, even when they are faced with a firehose of information on a daily basis.

Trager (2010) goes much further than others in the bargaining model vein in understanding that the messaging power of diplomatic statements is not reliant on their credibility, absent of other contextual factors. “Very often, when states negotiate over important security concerns, there is a danger that a threat (or other noncooperative behavior) will result in a breach in relations, not merely with respect to the issue at hand, but also with respect to other aspects of the relationship. In such cases, states can send ‘costless’ signals about their intentions” (347). Although he is still focused on the same scope of coercive threats, Trager is interested in measuring the impact of communicating resolve, specifically, and is still focused on a game theoretic model to show the effects of signaling through “costless” diplomatic rhetoric. Likely because of this, he must make some strong assumptions about the nature of diplomatic rhetoric itself in his story:

“Social aspects of the human world exist in language, through which they are created, altered, and reified. Within the social realm, some complex constructs, for instance, those that would be identified as sources of cultural difference, are the products of many agents interacting over long periods of time and consequently change only very gradually in general. But other aspects of the social

world, such as the 'situation' described by Bismarck, change more quickly, and such change is more often intentional. To bring about this sort of change, attempts at communication must succeed in conveying information. That is, they must be believed, at least partially. This article will not address how symbols acquire their meanings or how individuals are initiated into language groups. Rather, I assume for analytical purposes that a shared and unchanging language exists and ask this second question, namely, how it is that attempts at communication by adversaries can convey information" (348, emphasis added).

Trager therefore begins to introduce the idea that the information environment and form of diplomatic rhetoric allows it to communicate information, as well as the fact that a decision to communicate intentions (or not) about resolve in the first place can impact perceptions even in the most adversarial of contexts. Nevertheless, he deliberately scopes out the creation and reification of specific rhetorical forms, and how rhetoric has come to be mutually intelligible to practitioners in a way that allows them to read intentions through these ostensibly "costless" signals.

In his subsequent work, Trager continues to examine signaling behavior through a more practitioner-focused lens. In his 2017 book, for example, Trager uses archival materials from British diplomatic documents from 1855 to 1914 to uncover contemporaneous analyses of signaling behavior. Did diplomats at the time base their analyses of Russian intentions on troop movements, on private conversations with their counterparts, or on public declarations from leaders? Trager attempts to pit several signaling theories directly against each other to see which sources diplomats are actually using to make their analyses. He basically concludes that private diplomacy is actually a major source of information for diplomats when judging the credibility of another state's statements of intention, even between adversaries who have incentives to lie and cheat: "Among the most difficult of the diplomatic arts is the art of creating commitment – that is, creating a perception in the minds of interlocutors that a state is committed to certain courses of action in particular circumstances. Offers of cooperation, threats, and assurances are all attempts to create commitments. Since international actors gain an advantage if others form certain beliefs about their commitments, simple, costless

statements of intention cannot always be believed” Trager (2017, 16–17). But, he says: “Much information is exchanged in diplomatic discussions when neither side is attempting to convince the other of a commitment to a course of action” (17). Trager says in the book that this is quite obvious, and he therefore focuses on how information can be shared between adversaries who have incentives to bluff. However, I still want to better understand that first type of communication between states, not only because it actually makes up a large bulk of interactions, but also because it is unsatisfying to merely say that states can convey information easily when they have fewer incentives to bluff. That leaves on the table the when and how behind such state behavior. My theory of diplospeak fills in these details.

As the discussion above shows, in extant signaling literature, the debates focus on (and disagree about) the relative credibility of different forms of signaling; for some, public signals are most credible because they tie the hands of the leader, keeping them from bluffing or even changing course later on. For others, whether because of cost or noisiness, public statements are viewed as less credible than public ones. Regardless of the signaling method, however, once again the focus is squarely on measuring the credibility of a message as the outcome of interest, and rhetoric is included only insofar as it is (or fails to be) useful in creating credibility in a game of strategic interaction between states.

I focus instead on a logically prior question – how do states and their emissaries understand messages in the first place? Before one can ask whether a promise or threat is credible, it must first be understood as a promise or threat in the first place. In this sense, I ask a fundamentally different question than much of the extant literature on strategic communication in IR. This builds on Fierke’s Wittgensteinian approach to the study of language in international relations mentioned above, which she says focuses on “the dependence of our thoughts, intentions, or rationality – not to mention our experience of the external world – on an intersubjective language and context which is prior” (Fierke and Nicholson 2001, 19).

Nevertheless, it is important to address the aspect of mistrust and incentives to deceive

which has driven much of this extant focus in IR on credibility. I acknowledge that, of course, the anarchic nature of the international system makes it difficult if not impossible for states to set aside concerns over survival when interacting with rivals. Especially when thinking about bargaining scenarios characterized by disputes among rivals, coercive threats, or other crises, it makes sense that scholars emphasize how states are disincentivized to trust one another, and therefore need more significant reassurances when receiving signals of a counterpart's intentions.

However, this constant, high-level, active mistrust does not necessarily extend to the more banal, quotidian interactions between states that make up the vast majority of international relations. Ku and Mitzen (2022) explain this through their theory of system trust, which they call the “dark matter” of world politics. The background trust in the international system is what allows foreign policy to function on a day-to-day basis. As they say, despite the existence of a certain level of risk we still get on airplanes or, even riskier, behind the wheel of a car. The risks of these activities are (for most of us) not at the forefront of our minds, as they happen often enough and are governed by a certain level of background trust in the mechanics of the car, on road signs being accurate, on other drivers staying to the right, etc. “The study of trust at any level begins with the intuition that positive expectations about others’ actions and intentions are the basis of social life. Acting with others requires simultaneously managing awareness of the uncertainty of the outcome of these actions and our vulnerability to others’ whims and desires. Uncertainty is managed via trust, understood as a leap—of faith, cognition, or some combination — that enables a feeling of knowing others’ future behavior” (802).

We as individuals cannot erase our vulnerability as we navigate the world, both physically and socially. And yet, we manage to do so every single day. The existence of mistrust or skepticism or uncertainty in individual interactions does not mean that communication is not possible, useful, or trustworthy. Extrapolating to the system level, it is useful to think of

mistrust and costs for being duped on a sliding scale – in a daily foreign policy interaction in which the stakes are (relatively) low and deception would not really bring any benefits to the signal sender anyway, background trust allows states to keep functioning and interacting. In short, “System trust makes trusting a less costly choice than it otherwise would be” (814, emphasis added).

Because many studies of signaling in the IR literature tend to be laser focused on crises, deterrence, and coercive threats, moments in which the price of being deceived is as high as possible, they are naturally not so interested in the communicative role of rhetoric and diplomacy as a social phenomenon. To overcome the incredibly high level of mistrust in those scenarios, these scholars search for a large, concrete, observable change for which a verbal utterance was both necessary and sufficient for the eventual result. This is such a hard test that it is almost impossible to meet in the first place, much less in the realm of communication, which is such a constant, social, complex phenomenon that trying to show its specific effect on an international scale is bound for failure. This leads to either a) narrowing the focus down to very specific types of utterances in very specific contexts, such as public coercive threats made by a leader under electoral pressure, or bargaining scenarios with perfectly repeating interactions, or b) dismissing the idea of verbal communication having a major role to play in international relations in the first place. This dissertation instead focuses on how rhetoric aggregates and creates effects over time, especially in the 99 percent of international relations that takes place outside of crises. To consider this more quotidian aspect of communication in international relations, I next turn to work in the interpretivist tradition, whose approach theorizes the social nature of interactions both within and among states.

1.3.2 Interpretivist Approaches

Building on a similar revolution in philosophy earlier in the century, the “linguistic turn” invigorated critical approaches to the study of international relations in the 1980s and 1990s. As the name of this turn implies, this wave of research focused on language, discourse, and narratives as the primary subject of inquiry.

In the aftermath of this linguistic turn, however, some found the focus to be too much on discourse and narrative itself, rather than on discursive practices. This call for a “practice turn” in international relations (Cetina, Schatzki, and Savigny 2001) therefore sets the focus back on rhetoric and discourse as social action, rather than as the subject of inquiry in and of themselves. This was especially true for scholars like Ivar Neumann, who explicitly called for a return to practice within the study of diplomacy in order to uncover patterns of practice within diplomatic communities, arguing that discursive practices, rather than discourse itself, form the preconditions for social action (Neumann 2002).

Accounts of the causality of practices “must go through interpretation of social contexts and practical logics” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 242). How do you know what a wink means, for example? Is it, as Geertz (1973) asks, an acknowledgment of an inside joke? An attempt to flirt? Or just an involuntary twitch? The meaning of a given human movement is not static; it depends on background, context, and existing social knowledge. Practices are specific actions done in specific contexts imbued with learned meaning (Corradi, Gherardi, and Verzelloni 2010); practices therefore make actions and behaviors “hang together as one coherent structure, by pointing out the patterned nature of deeds in socially organized contexts” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6).

Cornut summarized the core tenets that approaches to practice theory in IR seem to share: 1) practices are embodied – they work by and through human interaction; 2) they are simultaneously performed by individuals and shared by groups; 3) they are patterned (Cornut 2017). Further, practices acquire theoretical and empirical meaning in communities

of practice (Adler 2005, 2008), where they develop, diffuse and become institutionalized. In this sense, it makes sense that much of the work on diplomacy in international relations has come from this tradition, including sociological approaches to diplomatic behavior as well as deep ethnographic work that illuminates the lived experience of diplomats carrying out particular diplomatic practices in specific embodied contexts (Neumann 2007; Adler 2008; Pouliot 2010; Morgan 2011; Neumann 2012; Constantinou 2013; Cornut 2015; Kuus 2015; Adler-Nissen 2016; Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019).⁹

Rather than focusing on the inherent qualities of a practice per se, scholars often qualify practices as (more or less) competent. Habit is highly contextual and cannot be right or wrong in and of itself. Rather, practice can be done “right” or “wrong” based on whether it is to be interpreted by the other party in a social interaction (Barnes 2001). This mirrors my focus on meaningful – as opposed to credible – signaling between states. In my theory, the goal is not necessarily to convince the listener of the accuracy or honesty of a statement or promise, but to make the statement or promise fundamentally understood in the first place. In this sense, I borrow the interactionist focus of these scholars by analyzing how an action is carried out by one actor and interpreted by another, rather than inherent qualities of the action itself.

In addition, practice theory also helpfully breaks down the idea, common in IR, that states act as corporate entities, as whole units interacting on the international stage. Instead, a practice approach considers the community of agents that make up a state; that by aggregating the practices of agents acting in patterned ways within organized social contexts, we can better understand state-to-state interactions. Although I take a more Wittgensteinian approach to linguistic interaction as language games played in different contexts, I share the theoretical understanding that social context is a fundamental aspect that is inextricably linked with action and communication.

9. See also broader discussions of how practice theory can facilitate the study of diplomacy and diplomatic activity such as (Cornut 2015) and (Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann 2015).

At the same time, however, my theory places emphasis on the deliberate, strategic, and relational aspects of state-to-state communication and rhetorical choice. This is not to say that practice theory – or, indeed, other poststructural approaches to international relations – have no place for strategic interaction. Rather, much like language appears in some rationalist treatments of signaling but not as a main point of inquiry, practice theory typically addresses but ultimately does not focus on the strategic use of language across contexts, including as a tool to communicate meaningfully between states.

In this sense, this dissertation gleans theoretical insight from interpretivist or practice-focused approaches to rhetoric as a social and communicative tool while maintaining a more rationalist focus on information sharing as an instrumental mechanism for strategic interaction between states under anarchy. My theory therefore fits well with work that bridges these two traditions.¹⁰ Pouliot’s concept of “practice tracing,” for example, puts forward a method to uncover insights that are attuned to both local social contexts but also to the generalizability of aggregated patterns of practice (Pouliot 2014). This is the way I approach my study of diplospeak, as a diplomatic practice with context-dependent specifics that can nevertheless be seen as examples of broader social phenomena. A given phrase may be specifically relevant to a bilateral relationship, but it is nevertheless part of a broader group of relationship-defining diplomatic phrases that can be traced both over time and across cases.

Through deeper engagement with one piece of work in particular – Iver Neumann (2007)’s reflection on his ethnographic work within the Norwegian Foreign Ministry – I can illustrate how my linguistic conventions approach shares some theoretical grounding with interpretivist scholars, but ultimately has a slightly different focus and therefore reaches different conclusions even from the same ethnographic data. In the piece, Neumann discusses his work

10. In this sense, I also owe a theoretical debt to constructivist scholars who worked to “seize the middle ground” between positivist and critical approaches to IR (Adler 1997); see also seminal work by among others, (Wendt 1992; Katzenstein 1996). While these works focus more on structure, change, norms, and ideas versus strategic exchange of meaningful language, they nonetheless paved the way for an approach to international relations inquiry that simultaneously attends to both the material and social.

as an advisor and speechwriter, focusing on the practice of speechwriting. He discusses how officials with different equities end up giving input on speeches, illuminating a process that Neumann saw as simultaneously frustrating and fascinating. On one hand, Neumann wished to make the speeches “better,” by which he meant more engaging, more policy forward, and less redundant. On the other hand, he saw this process as a demonstration of the importance of ethnographic observation to uncover habits that are foreign to outside viewers but internalized as to be natural to those with shared social knowledge.

The result is a fascinating exploration of a foreign policy bureaucracy from an outsider’s lens – but ultimately an outsider with a very particular opinion on how policy documents could be “improved.” Through his piece, one of Neumann’s key takeaways is how the process of speechwriting facilitates institutional identity-building within the foreign ministry. “Informing and convincing the audience of the message in each speech is not held to be important,” Neumann writes. “Information and argumentation is important enough, but the organization’s self-confirmation and the cementation of working relations between each part of the organization and between each employee are of greater importance” (194).

Interestingly, Neumann’s discussion of the speech drafting process – a process that appears to have frustrated him to no end – mirrors my understanding of diplospeak and conventional use of policy language. While researching a speech, Neumann noticed important recurring themes of values and globalization. He therefore decided “to structure the entire speech around the notion of ‘ethical globalization.’” After submitting the draft, Neumann got some feedback – it turned out that the foreign minister balked at the term ‘ethical globalization,’ and asked Neumann if he “could write a new draft more similar to previous speeches” (189). In the end, the minister made a speech that comported with previous ones, the local paper noted that the speech included nothing new, and the cycle continued. For Neumann, this experience was a frustrating one: “I had managed to confirm that analysis was unimportant in the Foreign Ministry system, that the audience’s reception was of little

or no interest to the Ministry and that the established patterns were difficult to break, but I had learned little else” (184).

In a discussion of another speech that Neumann once again tried to draft in a more innovative way to no avail, he explicitly discussed the importance of repetition in reifying policy:

“It was not possible to give a speech on Norwegian security without mentioning the importance of the U.S. security guarantee, nuclear waste in the North, and so on. If such things were not mentioned, it would be a signal that they were not given priority. Hence, the policy had to be repeated, if not it would be weakened. This is of course an entirely valid argument. It takes hard discursive work to keep things as they are (Garfinkel 1967). Making the world seem to be stable when it is in fact in constant flux, means that having power among other things involves having the ability to freeze meaning. It has to be done by constantly repeating specific representations of things, actions, and identities, until what one repeats is naturalized to such an extent that it appears doxic. One can only refrain from repeating representations if they are already embedded in other representations that are repeated, so that they are confirmed indirectly....A speech, a strategy document, and a list of topics that the MFA should like to have researched by externals are rather different kinds of written material, but they are drawn up in similar ways. As a result, they tend to be vague, and tend to look similar to one another. To the bureaucrat, this means speaking in one voice. To the politician who heads the ministry, however, what may matter more is what is being said. To him or her, the system may not do its job when it does its job in the way it always has.⁵ If so, then change will reach the interior of the organization from its margins, where the costs of nonadaptability is most keenly felt. Change in diplomacy may therefore be expected to be initiated by politicians, not by diplomats themselves....From the point of view of the bureaucrat, it is thus only when the system does not work that something new is produced, because the fact that something new is produced means precisely that the system has failed. Civil servants in the Foreign Ministry do not find this paradoxical. On the contrary, they see it as evidence that the civil service functions as it is supposed to” (194).

In his ethnographic work, Neumann therefore describes several insights that mirror my own findings: 1) it is important to diplomats to stick to the same language (especially specific key words and phrases) in order to reify the status quo; 2) the type of document or intended primary audience matters less than ensuring that the constant representation of policy is maintained through consistent language; 3) diplomats value consensus and “speaking with

one voice,” rather than individually trying to push policy ahead by suggesting new language; 4) politicians and bureaucrats have different goals with their approach to language, and the latter is more worried about maintaining a representation of policy than creating new policy. All of this is consistent with a story in which bureaucrats are creating and carrying out activities in order to build an identity amongst themselves and establish a community of practice within the ministry. At the same time, however, this discussion would be right at home in one of my interviews about diplospeak as a linguistic signal. Diplomats do not want to get ahead of policy. They see the importance of linguistic consistency across and within the ministry, so that other states are not confused about whose voice to prioritize. A speech given to academics or students or the press maintains the same policy lines verbatim, not despite but because of who is listening – namely other diplomats who can and will notice linguistic deviations.

While it was admittedly not Neumann’s focus, it is interesting to see the lack of attention to the deliberative, strategic, foreign policy implications of these processes, or even to the implications of the practices that he elucidates outside of the bureaucracy itself. For example, he discusses his frustration at how a speech he had drafted got neutered through extensive editing and ended up making little to no splash in the Norwegian press. In fact, as one of my interviewees explicitly said, that is often one of their main goals when writing official documents – it is their job to represent policy, not to get ahead of it, and one of the bureaucrat’s biggest nightmares is making the news. When Neumann decried the lack of attention to the audience, he meant that a speech for academics should sound more analytical, while one for a public audience should try to arouse broader interest in policy innovation. This ignores one of the key audiences – if not the audience for these types of speeches – other diplomats in foreign ministries around the world, for whom statements that merely repeat talking points are actually perfectly legible. In fact, it is only in a throwaway line at the end of a paragraph that this audience and goal is acknowledged: “However, one would

underestimate the diplomat if one thought that the speeches were not communicative at all. The speeches, at least the good speeches, are communicative for those who have the cultural competence to understand them, namely the diplomats of other countries (as well as a few highly specialized journalists and academics)” (196).

As this case illustrates, scholars like Neumann have provided extensive insights on the importance of a sociological and interactionist approach to the study of language in international relations, and have pushed forward work on diplomacy as a legitimate focus of inquiry. This literature on practices, and diplomatic practices in particular, therefore significantly informs my theoretical approach to the study of diplospeak. Indeed, the concept of patterned behavior, created within specific social contexts, that can aggregate into meaningful action which can be interpreted by other actors, is clearly reflective of my concept of diplospeak. Where I depart from this approach is my emphasis on the intentionality behind diplospeak as a rhetorical signaling mechanism. In short, in this dissertation, I am less interested in diplospeak practices as practices per se, but how linguistic patterns are used strategically by diplomats to communicate and understand policy. My theory therefore owes a lot to insights from both the bargaining model as well as interpretivist approaches to international interaction, ultimately putting forward an argument that emphasizes the strategic instrumentalist use of language but within shared, socially constructed communicative contexts.

1.3.3 Summary

As I will show in this dissertation, far from meaningless bureaucratic jargon, diplospeak is actually an important and strategic method of communication between states, especially in their day-to-day interactions. Diplospeak works as a kind of indicator, a mile marker as it were that keeps tabs on the state of an issue or relationship. It also helps diplomats communicate in ways that are clear to them as well as consistent over time, that can cut through the noise of constant communication, an especially important point in today’s information environment.

In short, I argue that states can effectively communicate policy positions to each other through the strategic use of diplospeak.

My study of diplospeak, therefore, sits in the middle of the two threads of international relations literature described above: credible signaling and diplomatic practices. I deliberately draw on insights from both the credible signaling literature, with its understanding of strategic communication between states, as well as practice approaches, which appreciate the fluid and social nature of intra- and inter-state interactions. Stated most simply, work on signaling has something to say about strategic communication, but not much to say about language and particular word choices. At the same time, poststructuralist work has contributed significant insights on the production and practice of diplomacy, but does not have as much to say about language as strategic communication that can affect outcomes in IR.

In fact, my approach shares much in common with scholarship in IR theory that focuses on the strategic use of rhetoric by states, including work on the use of rhetoric in legitimation and crafting narratives to persuade audiences to support a certain course of action (Goddard and Krebs 2015; Krebs 2015; Sundaram 2021). Similarly, the concept of securitization combines the focus on speech acts as a unit of analysis and the role that presenting relationships in a certain way can affect how actors – and actions – are perceived (Wæver 1993; Balzacq 2005; Floyd 2011; Guzzini 2011; Hayes 2012). In contrast, I am more focused on communication between states rather than the affective results of certain discursive practices, although the two concepts are certainly related. Nevertheless, I share a focus on the language itself and its role as a communicative act between a sender and receiver, without necessarily specifying the underlying persuasive intentions behind these utterances.

Following Krebs and Jackson (2007): “We are not prepared to follow our rational-choice colleagues down the path of assuming and deducing preferences. Rather, we take a less-traveled road and argue that social scientists should not begin by specifying the intentions of actors. Let us be clear: we are not arguing that actors do not possess motives, that

those motives do not shape actors' behavior, or that such behavior is irrelevant to political outcomes. But we do aver that purposive accounts are analytically less useful than models in which preferences need not be specified or ranked. We therefore seek to minimize the place of motives as driving forces in our accounts of political processes and outcomes" (41). Similarly, I do not begin by assuming underlying preferences or policy positions. Instead, I build on the helpful work within the practice turn in IR to illuminate how repeated, socially constructed acts build into traceable patterns of language. I then take it a step further by using these assumptions to build a theory of how diplomats, working on behalf of their states, can strategically use these patterns to communicate meaningfully to their counterparts abroad.

This project therefore makes two key contributions to the field of IR. First, it engages with the signaling literature in a way that opens up the study of communication between states in the daily conduct of foreign policy. While maintaining a commitment to a data-driven empirical approach, I nonetheless argue that the high levels of mistrust that characterize crisis signaling between states does not necessarily mean that rhetoric cannot be a useful tool for strategic communication in the day-to-day conduct of foreign policy.

Secondly, I contribute to the growing interest in diplomacy as a thematic and theoretical focus within the IR scholarship. As diplomacy studies scholars are well aware, treatment of diplomacy within mainstream IR has only recently begun to flourish, while studies of diplomacy outside of IR have remained undertheorized.¹¹ Indeed, Rathbun (2014) points out that IR theorists have not paid enough attention to diplomats as individual actors with agency who also face incentives and constraints that could have large-scale effects: "Reducing important outcomes to structural features beyond agents' control, such as the ability to send costly signals, prominent traditions in international relations theory have long treated diplomacy implicitly or explicitly as automatic, unproblematic, and ultimately unimportant"

11. As Steiner (2018) points out, some scholars of diplomacy are against the very idea of trying to create generalized theories of diplomacy because it is constantly changing and because incredibly difficult to measure the specific causes and outcomes of diplomatic maneuvers.

(1). This seems to be changing in recent years, however, as more scholars become interested in developing diplomatic actions as a valid place upon which to build generalizable theories of international relations. In this endeavor, I contribute to a growing body of empirical work on impacts of diplomatic interaction (Moons and Bergeijk 2017; Trager 2017; Lindsey 2017; Gertz 2018; Holmes 2018; Gray and Potter 2020; Malis 2021; Lindsey 2024), the role of emotions and insults in diplomatic interactions (Fattah and Fierke 2009; Hall 2015; Wong 2016, 2019; Faizullaev 2017; Rousseau and Baele 2021), summitry (Dunn 1996; Lebovic and Saunders 2016; Ostrander and Rider 2019; Malis 2021; Danielson and Hedling 2022), and the bureaucracy of diplomacy (Thrall 2024).¹²

In my study of diplospeak, I show that repeated use of certain words and phrases within specific policy contexts can be used by practitioners to signal intentions between states on a day-to-day basis. A given phrase (i.e. “special relationship”) may be specifically relevant to a bilateral relationship, but it is nevertheless part of a broader group of relationship-defining diplomatic phrases that can be traced both over time and across cases. In the following chapters, I use a combination of novel interviews with former diplomats from two different countries (the United States and South Korea), qualitative analysis of archival material, and quantitative computational text analysis to show how diplospeak functions as a strategic signaling tool for states.

1.4 Previewing the Dissertation

In Chapter 2, I first lay out my theory of diplospeak conventions as a meaning-making tool in international relations. Specifically, I argue that certain features of linguistic conventions

12. This recent wave of work on the theoretical and empirical investigation of diplomacy and diplomats builds on literature that is more historical, structural, or descriptive in nature, including by practitioners themselves (Nicolson 1939; Regala 1959; Butterfield and Wight 1966; Lauren 1976; Kissinger 1994; Jönsson and Hall 2005; Black 2011; Sharp 2009; Ross 2011), work on specific cases or diplomatic cultures and styles (Liu 2002; Farrall and Prantl 2016; Robertson 2019; Kopp and Naland 2021; Gregory 2024; McKercher and Stevenson 2024) as well as evolving issues in diplomacy such as digitization and technology (Der Derian 2003; Bátora 2008; Bjola and Holmes 2015; Manor 2019).

make them useful as a mechanism for communication between states, despite barriers to understanding inherent in our anarchic international system; linguistic conventions have the ability to facilitate understanding between two parties based solely on iterated interactions and incentives to coordinate around shared meaning, even without shared underlying preferences. In this chapter, I discuss these assumptions as they apply to daily communication between ordinary people, then extend them to the diplomatic sphere. I finish by putting forth a theory of the process through which diplomatic conventions emerge and evolve through the daily practice of diplomatic interactions.

In the following chapters, I explore the origins, implications, and uses of diplospeak, all in service of showing how linguistic conventions help states communicate with each other in meaningful ways through rhetoric alone. I organize these chapters around a few goals. First, I establish how diplospeak looks in practice and show how it is produced, processed and disseminated between states. Then, I test my theory of diplospeak, specifically conventions of diplospeak, within the context of two different types of diplospeak: defining relationships and conveying respect. I leave a deeper discussion of other types of diplospeak to future projects.

Chapter 3 therefore starts by laying the groundwork for what, exactly, diplospeak is. First, using interviews with former diplomats from both the United States and South Korea, I describe the daily process by which diplomats and civil servants draft, edit, and approve the exact wording of public statements that represent official state policy on a wide variety of issues. As this process makes clear, consistency is key, and making changes to established wording on a given policy issue is a significant undertaking that only happens in response to a change in underlying policy. On the receiving side, my interviews make clear that as diplomats gain expertise in a given policy area, they learn how to quickly spot the key diplospeak terms that mark the status quo. Further, they do, indeed, identify deviations from those terms as an indicator of an underlying policy change.

After qualitatively establishing how this process works from the diplomats' perspective, I finish this chapter with a quantitative text analysis of archived State Department documents. Specifically, I analyze all the official text prepared for the department spokesperson to use when responding to press inquiries throughout the years 2007 and 2008, as well as documentation on how many officials had a hand in drafting and clearing each document. This extensive corpus, consisting of more than 7,000 documents spanning those two years, allows me to trace which topics garnered the most attention from the State Department bureaucracy. In short, I show that it is indeed true that the American diplomatic apparatus does pay a lot of attention to their words and, further, they pay more attention to some words than others. For more routinized and steady relationships or topics, fewer officials are assigned to double check the exact wording of a statement; for more volatile topics, where there are more diplospeak "landmines" for a state to accidentally stumble across, a significantly higher number of officials are assigned to make sure they use diplospeak conventions as intended. This chapter therefore supports my hypothesis that conventions of diplospeak help states communicate with each other, a contention supported by qualitative and quantitative analysis of variations in diplomatic behavior.

Chapter 4 then takes on one specific type of diplospeak – defining a relationship – to show how these processes play out in the context of a particular bilateral relationship. This chapter is built on an in-depth qualitative case study of the evolving diplospeak of the US-South Korea relationship during the tumultuous period of the 1980s. Based on both Korean and American archival material, I trace the origins and impacts of several key phrases that have come to symbolize change and continuity in the 75-year-long US-Korea alliance. This chapter therefore shows how diplospeak phrases have facilitated communication in a specific state-to-state relationship.

Chapter 5 focuses on a second type of diplospeak – words that convey respect. In this chapter, I use a novel dataset consisting of State Department and White House public state-

ments from 2001-2024, specifically moments in which the U.S. government directly mentions the leaders of four adversarial states – Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. By analyzing the nearly 10,000 direct mentions of these leaders, I trace patterns in which honorifics the United States uses when talking about the leaders of those states. I find that a negative shift in honorifics (i.e. granting the leaders less rhetorical respect) is correlated with, and indeed predates, subsequent shifts in sanctions policy. In fact, I find that a negative shift in honorifics is just as good, if not better, at predicting an upcoming shift in sanctions policy when compared with the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) dataset. In other words, detection of a shift in the way one state refers to the leader of another state can be a useful indicator of upcoming policy shifts. In this way, I systematically show that diplospeak is directly tied to policy, and that tracing conventions of diplospeak can help us – and policymakers – keep track of policy continuity and change.

Finally, I conclude this study of diplospeak by summarizing these findings, reiterating my theoretical conclusions, and previewing a future research agenda that will continue to examine when and how diplospeak helps function as a coordinating mechanism in communication between states. This chapter will offer takeaways for both the burgeoning literature on diplomacy and rhetoric in International Relations, as well as for policymakers tasked with speaking on behalf of or analyzing the rhetoric of states.

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CHAPTER 2

THEORY OF DIPLOSPEAK

2.1 Introduction

At its core, a language can be seen as a shared vocabulary that conveys information that is mutually agreed upon and understood by those who speak it. My theory sees diplospeak – the language of diplomats – in a similar way. For those fluent in it, there are words and phrases that have specific communicative value when used by states. When speaking English, “special partnership” and “special relationship” are interchangeable; when speaking diplospeak, using the former to describe US-UK relations is unacceptable. Much like a “traditional” language, diplospeak has a recognizable vocabulary that, when combined with contextual and social knowledge, allows speakers to send meaningful messages. Diplospeak can therefore be seen as a language that diplomats become fluent in through their experience and expertise.

Although this dissertation is ultimately aimed at understanding state-to-state interactions in international relations, my theory also draws on insights from linguistic philosophy to explain how the socially created language of diplospeak can be a useful strategic tool that states use to facilitate communication. In a way, I think of diplospeak as a sort of symbolic “code,” a vocabulary that has become imbued with particular communicative meaning through continuous use by diplomats. This idea is not necessarily novel in international relations – in fact, even while he was largely focused on more traditional approaches to state image management and reputations as a means for credible signaling, Jervis (1970) referred to diplomatic language as “coded language” and described some of its advantages: “even if it [coded language] does not conceal anything from anybody, it can be preferable to ‘plain language’ because it is so different that it cannot be confused with a casual expression of a general position. Thus, the very stilted nature of diplomatic language ensures that it is unlikely to be used when the actor does not wish to convey the standard message” (p. 117).

However, even if the concept of a “coded” language of diplomacy has appeared in this way before, analysis of *language* itself in state communications remains underexplored in the literature. In this dissertation, I therefore explore how conventions of diplomatic language become intelligible and meaningful, and how those conventions facilitate communication between states in international relations.

Loosely following Frost and Lechner (2016), I conceptualize diplospeak as a language game for which there are socially generated rules that allow meaningful communication between diplomats. Frost and Lechner point out that the practice turn in international relations was borne out of Bourdieu’s notion of practice similar to Aristotle’s praxis, which focuses on action or meaningful doing; in this approach practice is action that can be performed more or less competently. In contrast, a Wittgensteinian linguistic approach thinks of a practice/practices as a “rule-based framework (resembling a game), which enables the agent to perform a particular action” (336). Wittgenstein even uses the term “a practice” as a synonym for a language game (Wittgenstein 1968, 202). In this vein, I approach my study of diplospeak as an attempt to recover the rules of such a game by empirically tracing how diplomats use language and what meanings they assign to certain terms and phrases. In so doing, I show how language itself serves an important purpose in facilitating the daily conduct of international relations.

In this chapter, I introduce the theoretical foundations of my argument that diplospeak is a type of linguistic convention that enables communication between states. First, I discuss important concepts and terms to lay the groundwork for the theoretical discussion of diplomatic rhetoric. Then I borrow from concepts in linguistic philosophy to explain what linguistic conventions are, and how they enable people in general to communicate. Next, I turn to the realm of international relations, arguing that the same assumptions that make linguistic conventions powerful in daily speech also apply to the use of diplospeak between states. I then lay out my theory of diplospeak conventions, detailing the processes by which

these conventions are generated, changed, and realized in practice. Finally, I preview the rest of the dissertation, laying out observable implications of my theory and how my empirical chapters will show that diplospeak does indeed enable states to communicate meaningfully on a day-to-day basis.

2.2 Concepts and Terms

My theory deploys *diplospeak* as a mechanism that allows states to *meaningfully communicate* with each other. It is therefore crucial to understand each of those pieces – diplospeak and meaningful communication – in order to properly assess my theory. In this section, I define each of these terms as I use them in the dissertation.

First, perhaps the most important term that needs to be clearly defined in this dissertation is “diplospeak.” To the extent that it is formally defined elsewhere, diplospeak is described in less than flattering terms – Collins Dictionary, for example, defines it as “the polite and placatory language usually associated with diplomats” (“Diplospeak Definition” 2020). My definition of diplospeak is not fundamentally different other than being more neutral, conceptualizing it simply as *the language used in the conduct of diplomacy*. In fact, my conceptualization of diplospeak sees it as similar to jargon – “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group” (in my case, diplomats) (“Definition of Jargon” 2024). In fact, jargon also has its own negative connotations, especially when viewed as a way to pretentiously signal one’s membership in an exclusive group and/or gatekeep knowledge from the uninitiated. However, jargon has also been seen as an important technique for both clear communication and identity building within professional communities (Hudson 1978; Gallo 2016). My conceptualization of diplospeak reflects its status as the language of the profession of diplomats, and its use as a tool wielded by those diplomats to communicate in a way that is clearly understood by those fluent in this language, even if it is seen as placatory or euphemistic by others.

The next part of my theory asserts that, by using diplospeak, states can send “meaningful” messages between states. Defined most simply, I see “meaningful communication” as *communication that is recognized and understood by its intended recipient*. For a verbal statement to be meaningful, the listener must first recognize that there has been a message sent in the first place; only then can the intention behind the message be assessed. If states are constantly speaking, but their talk is dismissed or even goes unheard by other states, it is not meaningful under my definition. Further, if a message is recognized by a listening state but they do not understand the intended purpose of the statement, or regularly misinterpret the signal, this is also not meaningful communication under my definition. For me, meaningful communication in its idealized form proceeds as follows: State A releases a statement related to a new policy. State B both *recognizes* that a signal has been sent, and *understands* that the message is related to that new policy, even if they must do additional analysis to gather more information about State A’s specific goals and intentions.

Contrast this definition of “meaningful” with “credible” signaling, the mainstay of international relations work on state communications, which emphasizes an assessment of the underlying truth or sincerity of a statement. In the most general sense, credibility is thought of as “the extent to which an actor’s statements or implicit commitments are believed” (Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler 2021, 169). Even more specifically, “Credible signaling is achieved when it is convincingly shown that the signaler is resolved to fulfill its threat or promise” (Quek 2016, 2). These definitions revolve around the *believability* or *persuasiveness* of the sending state’s message, usually a specific threat or promise. I want to emphasize that while truth, or the listener’s understanding of the sincerity of a statement, is an important component of communication, that is not my primary interest here. I am less interested in what the listener believes the other side will do; instead, I focus on when and how the listener recognizes a signal has been sent in the first place, and whether the message was understood by the receiver. This is where my theory of diplospeak comes in; I theorize that

it is conventions of diplospeak that facilitate this meaningful communication between states.

The final terms that are therefore useful to define are the linguistic concepts of conventions and language games. I will go into much more depth on these concepts in the following section when I introduce their history and use in linguistic philosophy, so I define them only briefly here. First, conventions are typical ways of doing things, be they unspoken norms of behavior, formalized laws or rules, or habits. To do something *by convention* is to do it in the typical way. Linguistic conventions, therefore, are typical ways of doing as they relate to language itself. Again, the following section will make the definition of conventions, specifically linguistic conventions, much more specific. Relatedly, language games are Wittgenstein's conceptual version of linguistic conventions. In this metaphor, communication is like a game, with each conversation following a set of spoken and unspoken rules to help the players exchange information. To connect these concepts together and reiterate my theory: By "playing" a diplospeak language game, diplomats follow conventional rules that they all know in order to send and receive messages in a meaningful manner. Below, I discuss this assertion further, drawing on insights from linguistic philosophy to establish the building blocks of how language functions to create clear and understandable interactions between people. This will allow me to later return to the realm of diplomacy, connecting these linguistic concepts to the function of diplospeak as a tool for state communication.

2.3 Linguistic Philosophy

Before I can explore how rhetoric works as a communicative tool in the field of international relations, we first need to learn more about the fundamentals of language, communication, and meaning. I therefore start with the baseline question of how language itself works to create meaning that can be exchanged between people. While various fields have examined the question of how language relates to meaning (and what meaning, itself, means), I focus on two strains of work from linguistic philosophy: Wittgensteinian ordinary language philosophy

and language games, as well as work on linguistic conventions from David Lewis.

In the following discussion, I establish three key assumptions based on insights from this strain of linguistic philosophy: 1) the meaning of language is its use in practice; 2) words have different meanings in different contexts; and 3) linguistic conventions are important tools that enable people to coordinate around these contextual meanings. By the end of this section, it should therefore be clear that in ordinary, daily conversations, context combined with conventions creates communication. Of course, I am aware that this is a simplification of the vast scholarship on meaning, communication, and language both in linguistic philosophy and in fields such as linguistics, sociology, and more. But for the sake of parsimony and to extrapolate into my main context of interest – communication between states via diplomatic rhetoric – these are the insights I draw upon from this literature.

2.3.1 Meaning in Use

Many debates in the field of linguistic philosophy center around the concept of meaning itself. Is meaning the picture that appears in your mind when you hear a word or statement? Is it the connection between an object in the world and its linguistic label? Is it the conditions under which a statement is true or false (whatever that may mean)? In response to what he saw as increasingly convoluted attempts to philosophize about meaning, including in his own earlier work, Wittgenstein pioneered a different way to think about language, summing up his philosophy with a deceptively simple statement: “The meaning of a word is its use in language” (Wittgenstein 1958, §43). In this one sentence, he dismissed the search for some sort of objective truth that language is meant to describe, and instead turned his focus to the social.

To understand his point, picture a common occurrence – making a typo in a text exchange with a friend. Depending on how egregious the error, they were probably able to figure out what the text message meant without too much extra thinking, and everyone continued to

communicate uninterrupted. But let us take this a step further. What if that typo becomes an inside joke? All friend groups have jokes that are objectively nonsensical if we think about them too much, but that is the point – we do not think that hard about them, and yet they communicate all kinds of meaning within that group. This new “incorrect” word has a perfectly clear meaning when used between friends: as a substitute for the original, correct word, as a reference to the time when the term first appeared, as a way to lovingly rib a friend, as a way to mark oneself as a member of the in-group, etc. In this way, even an “incorrect” or nonsense word can come to have meaning *through its actual use* in communication between people.

This example also previews the next key takeaway from Wittgenstein’s work – context is deeply important when it comes to meaning. How do we know if a joke is good-natured teasing or malicious bullying, for example? The person speaking and their relationship to the listener, the nature of the joke, who else is around to witness potential embarrassment – all of these contextual factors matter in determining the underlying meaning of such an interaction. And, as anyone who has tried to make an inside joke around the wrong audience knows well, clear meaning in one scenario does not necessarily transfer to new communicative contexts. This is where Wittgenstein adds the concept of language games to his understanding of meaning as language in use, to help explain how communicative contexts shape that use.

2.3.2 *Language Games*

One of Wittgenstein’s most famous concepts is that of language games, the idea that communication involves speakers and listeners volleying with each other in ways that follow underlying rules, whether they realize it or not. By describing language in this manner, Wittgenstein makes three clever moves that contribute to a more practical understanding of what we do when we communicate with each other: language is *socially enacted*, *contextually dependent*, and *reliant on understandings of similar phenomena*.

First, he points out that language is not just a collection of static definitions of words and expressions, but rather something social, something that humans constantly use, adapt, and change: “Here the term ‘*language-game*’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” Wittgenstein (1958, §23). Recall the example from the previous section – as we volley, joke around, and interact with each other, we make up all kinds of new phrases or use existing ones in creative ways, whether it is inside jokes on a small scale or slang on a larger one. At the same time, though, these words and phrases cannot just be used at random; there are also socially derived rules that come to shape their use. Even the most seemingly absurd slang is used in certain ways – in fact, one of the easiest ways to spot a member of an older generation is when they try to deploy a new slang term in the wrong moment. In other words, meaning is in its use, yes, but it still exists within specific linguistic and social contexts.

Second, Wittgenstein introduces the idea of “family resemblance” to help explain how people can make sense of various concepts even if we are not constantly referring back to dictionary definitions for every single word we encounter. This idea of family resemblance also helps with learning, adapting, and introducing new concepts. Let us say you are invited to participate in an activity you are not familiar with; when asked for clarification, a friend tells you it is a type of game. You may not know exactly what the activity will entail, but, based on prior knowledge of what games are, you may now have at least a general idea. This is part of what helps language evolve, and what helps people understand symbols, jokes, and references that they may not have directly encountered before – as long as they can make connections to something they already understand. This is often the case for slang, which tends to draw on existing linguistic resources and twist them, applying existing words to new contexts. And yet, many of us, especially when we were younger, were able to figure out what new slang words meant based on how they are being used by peers around us.

Finally, Wittgenstein points out that different contexts call for different language games

– the meaning of a word in one game may not perfectly transfer into the rules of another. We may not actively think about communication in this way, but nevertheless we play different language games all the time. We talk to our friends differently than we talk to our colleagues or, even more so, to our bosses. The exact same word choice in one setting can have entirely different connotations in another. In modern slang, it is largely acceptable for friends to call each other “bitch,” a word that, regardless of tone or intention, would be far less welcome in a boardroom. In one language game (brunch with friends), using the word “bitch” is fully within the rules; in another language game (boardroom meeting) it is wildly out of bounds. The entire concept of code switching – the idea that marginalized people in particular learn how to moderate their linguistic choices depending on the group they are addressing at a given time – is built on this premise (Gardner-Chloros 2009).

To take this a step further, not all language games (and rules) are created equal. A misspeak, or misreading of a social situation, is not guaranteed to even be noticeable or significantly derail the conversation. However, there are certain words that have come to convey more social meaning than others, and a misuse is more noticeable and socially detrimental. These particularly important words could include honorifics, names, expletives, and others that convey layers of social meaning. Is there something intrinsically important about the word “Mr.” or “Dr.”? The reason one might get annoyed when addressed without a title is not something derived from the word itself, but from the social implications of being denied some sort of respect. This feeling is even more striking for people already experiencing socially mediated concerns over being taken seriously in professional settings. A female professor is not annoyed at being called “Miss” because of a technicality over the factually correct title. Rather, it is because of the lack of respect that is wrapped up in that word choice in our modern social context, especially if others around her are addressed properly.

So far, I have laid out the baseline assumptions that meaning is derived from language as it is actually used, and that that use is driven in part by being attentive to different

communicative contexts. But this begs the question – how do different words in different language games come to have those shared meanings in the first place? How are the rules of these various games known to those that play them, even without necessarily being explicitly taught them? To answer these questions, I next turn to the work of Lewis, who takes the idea of language games and adds an understanding of coordination and strategy among game players.

2.3.3 *Linguistic Conventions*

In his seminal work on convention, Lewis starts from what he calls a “platitude” – the idea that language is ruled by convention: “Words might be used to mean almost anything; and we who use them have made them mean what they do because somehow, gradually and informally, we have come to an understanding that this is what we shall use them to mean. We could perfectly well use these words otherwise – or use different words, as men in foreign countries do. We might change our conventions if we like” (Lewis 1969, 1). He then goes on to pull apart this truism – that language is ruled by convention – showing how communication between parties, and indeed language itself, can be built up by using conventions to solve a series of coordination problems. In short, it is *through* convention that a “linguistic expression can come to be associated with its meaning” (Lepore and Stone 2015, 315).

Table 1 above shows Lewis’s full definition of convention as laid out in his seminal 1969 book. While the conceptual building blocks involved in constructing this definition, as well as the implications of it, are too broad to discuss in full here, there are a few key points worth emphasizing. First, a convention involves a recurrent situation among parties with a preference to coordinate in those recurrent situations (or, at least, most of such situations).¹ To be clear, this does not mean that all parties must have the same *underlying preferences*,

1. See Lewis (1969) for far more details about these coordination games, how conventions help solve them, and importance for communication. See also Schelling (1960; 1966), Stein (1982), and Majeski and Friks (1995) for more discussion on coordination as it applies to the realm of international relations in particular.

Figure 2.1: Convention Assumptions

Lewis' Definition of Conventions, with emphasis added in underline	
A regularity R in the behavior of members of a population P when they are agents in a <u>recurrent situation</u> S is a <u>convention</u> if and only if it is true that, and it is common knowledge in P that, in <u>almost any instance</u> of S <u>among members</u> of P ,	(1) <u>almost everyone</u> conforms to R ;
	(2) <u>almost everyone expects</u> almost everyone else to conform to R ;
	(3) almost everyone has <u>approximately the same preferences</u> regarding all possible combinations of actions;
	(4) almost everyone prefers that any one more conform to R , on condition that almost everyone conform to R ;
	(5) almost everyone would prefer that any one more conform to R' , on condition that almost everyone conform to R' .

merely that a coordination equilibrium is preferable to any given party defecting. One example Lewis gives in his book is two acquaintances meeting for lunch – even if one colleague prefers tacos when the other prefers steak, it is overall preferable for the two to meet at the same restaurant than each eating their preferred cuisine alone. In these circumstances, how do the parties come to a coordination equilibrium? Lewis argues that they can refer to established conventions to solve this problem. Let us say the two colleagues tend to eat tacos one week, and steak the next, alternating between their personal preferences. If they went to the taco place last week, where are they going this week? The established convention helps guide the two parties to the same place – the steak restaurant – even without having to text each other to confirm plans.

While Lewis includes a few important assumptions about contexts in which conventions can help parties communicate – namely iterated interactions and preference to coordinate – it is also important to establish what is not required of conventions. Note that there is NO requirement for every single member to conform every single time (the existence of occasional lies or mistakes does not mean there is not a convention that generally holds, as I will discuss in more depth later) and NO requirement for actors to have any given underlying preferences other than coordination; nor do speakers need to be working within some kind

of Habermasian ideal speech situation.² Finally, and importantly, Lewis rejects the idea that conventions are just the result of hard-wired behavior, genes, etc., or that they require explicit agreement. In other words, those two colleagues will alternate between tacos and steak every other week by habit (convention) even if there is nothing inherently superior about either option, and even if they never sat down and agreed that that was their plan. Conventions can therefore be instituted explicitly (i.e. through law, treaties, agreements, or protocol) or evolve out of unconscious coordination around meaning created through repeated social interactions:

“Lewis’s notion of convention allows for conventions that evolve gradually and tacitly as a side-effect of agents’ independent need to make their way in the social world. The first time we face a coordination problem, we have no choice but to do something. So, we do whatever occurs to us. But salience gives us a certain probability of success. It may be that what occurs to us matches what others do, because of natural affinities. Successful coordination creates a precedent that we can rely on in future interactions. Eventually we have enough confidence from our successful experience coordinating that we have developed the mutual expectations that constitute a convention. As long as agents are able to coordinate in particular kinds of ways, then the conventions are implicit in the choices they make and the knowledge they have of one another” (Lepore and Stone 2015, 320).

Think back to the opening example of US-UK ties being described as a “special partnership” instead of a “special relationship.” The problem is not that “special partnership” is a worse phrase per se. The problem is that the two countries had developed a convention over time, a convention that was broken when the press secretary deviated from social expectations, leaving diplomats and “special relationship watchers” scrambling to understand

2. Habermas put forward the idea of an idealized speech situation as a tool or process through which members of a society can exchange speech acts and assess their sincerity, truthfulness, or normative correctness. It relies on a series of requirements for a speech situation to facilitate that process: “1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse. 2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever. 2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse. 2c. Everyone is allowed to express his (or her) attitudes, desires, and needs. 3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his (or her) rights as laid down in (1) and (2)” (Habermas 1986, as quoted by Rasmussen et al.). To reiterate, my theory of diplospeak does not impose these conditions, and in fact explicitly attempts to explain how actors can communicate in the absence of these conditions.

why (Burkeman 2009). There is no particular reason why the two allies should have initially coordinated around the phrase “special relationship” rather than any other similar options; per Lewis, they could have chosen any number of equally acceptable and possible phrases to describe their relationship. Nevertheless, the meaning of this phrase has now solidified because of continued use and mutual acceptance of the particular meaning of those two words used together. In short, the convention of how to describe the bilateral US-UK relationship, built up through expectations solidified over time in this particular context, is to use the phrase “special relationship,” and not any other similar phrases.

Finally, for my purposes, one of the most helpful concepts from Lewis is the idea of *accommodation* – that when people are conversing with each other, they tend to naturally adjust to make the conversation continue to make sense. (Lewis 1979) This is reminiscent of the example above of texting errors – if a person can make sense of the text, they are likely to accommodate a small typo, continuing to converse as if nothing had happened. Thomason (1990) gives another good example of accommodation à la Lewis: Say Person A starts off a conversation by saying “There isn’t a doorstep in this room.” Person B in turn asks, “Why do you want a doorstep?” Finally, Person A responds, “I did not say I wanted a doorstep.” While this is technically true – Person A remarked on the lack of doorstep, they did not explicitly ask for one – this response comes off as disingenuous, and completely cuts off the conversation. This kind of pedantry is just not how people speak; we naturally accommodate each other by reading between the lines, by making utterances make sense in service of our continued conversation.

Wittgenstein has a similar idea in his language games, that because the same utterances can have different meanings in different language games, it can derail a conversation if a speaker exports one meaning to another context. For example, if Person A asks whether a dresser is made of solid wood, it would be inappropriate for Person B to answer with a monologue about atoms and the space between them, concluding that nothing is truly

solid on an atomic level. This is clearly not what Person A meant by their question, and it would be disingenuous to be so attached to such rigid concerns about the physical “truth” of solidness when the goal in that moment is to communicate clearly with another human being. In this sense, both Lewis and Wittgenstein take an incredibly practical approach to language as a social tool, one that is ultimately used in service of communication, rather than being constrained by an adherence to inflexible rules. Now that I have established language as a context-based, social phenomenon, I next turn to the realm of diplomacy, showing how these insights can be helpful to explain how diplomats are able to make sense of even the most seemingly banal and bureaucratized conversations.

2.3.4 Summary

This discussion of linguistic philosophy has yielded several key insights about the use of language in communication and meaning-making. In short, different communicative contexts have different rules and goals that shape meaning in that specific scenario. Speakers and listeners in those language games coordinate around shared meanings over time by continuing to interact with and accommodate each other. This leads to a plethora of different language games with different vocabularies and different purposes, that we all somehow navigate every day without even thinking about it. In sum, part of the scoreboard of language games is the subconscious exercise of “calculating” the meaning of a speech “given its conventional content, in light of *what we already know of her plans and intentions*” (Roberts 2015, 358). Once again, it is clear that context, coupled with convention, creates meaning.

Conventions therefore have two key requirements: 1) repeated interactions, and 2) basic incentives to coordinate around meaning. Note that these assumptions do not include incentives for the two parties to cooperate, or to share interests per se. In fact, for linguistic conventions to be useful in facilitating communication, they do not require 1) shared personal interests and underlying goals or 2) perfect use. These assumptions explain how conventions

of language facilitate communication between ordinary people. The question remains, however, whether these assumptions can apply to diplospeak, a specific set of linguistic conventions carried out not between ordinary people but between diplomats as representatives of states in the international system. The following section extrapolates these assumptions to the case of state-to-state communication, arguing that they do indeed hold in diplomatic scenarios.

2.4 The Case of Diplospeak

I make two important moves to apply the core concepts of linguistic philosophy as laid out above to the specific context of diplospeak as it is used between states. First, I show that the requirements for linguistic conventions to solidify around shared meaning do indeed hold in diplomatic contexts. Second, I show that the special features of the diplomatic context – the fact that it represents state-to-state communication in an anarchic system with incentives to lie – do not violate the assumptions needed for linguistic conventions to emerge. Therefore, by the end of this section I will have established that the communicative power that drives linguistic conventions does indeed apply to diplomatic rhetoric. To recap, the definition of linguistic conventions *requires*: 1) repeated interactions, and 2) incentives to coordinate. If diplomatic contexts meet these requirements, then the logic of conventions should apply.

2.4.1 *Deception and Credibility*

While there are concerns about incentives to deceive in any interaction, Lewis points out that conventions that hold *on the whole* are still valid; the existence of exceptions and failures to conform to a convention do not invalidate the convention per se. Further, Lewis allows for different levels of difficulty in reaching coordination equilibria. To illustrate, he contrasts the example of a millionaire distributing his fortune, but only if every single potential recipient sends him \$10 first, compared with the above example of two people figuring out where to

eat. The former is high risk, as it involves both an upfront investment and cooperation among many parties. The latter, however, is much more quotidian, and only requires two people to conform to pre-established expectations. In short, when the stakes are (relatively) lower, the "mutual confidence" required for a coordination equilibrium to hold is also lower (See p. 26-27 in *Conventions*). This mirrors considerations in the international relations literature about signaling credibility; in high-stakes scenarios in which state survival (or, at the very least, significant losses of blood and treasure) are at issue, it makes sense that reaching coordination is far more difficult. In fact, for scholars like Fearon, information asymmetry in these high stakes contexts can exacerbate conflict between states (Fearon 1995). But not every diplomatic interaction takes place at these incredibly high stakes moments, in which full blown conflict is truly on the line; there are many more daily diplomatic interactions in which the mutual confidence required to come to coordination equilibria is significantly lower.

To understand this, think about the varied ways people approach communication in their daily lives. The average person rarely thinks about communications with others in terms of credibility (at least consciously), but there are some scenarios in which it becomes a more relevant consideration. When chatting with a hairdresser about how their day is going, it is probably not a huge concern. When buying a new car from a dealer, however, one probably starts thinking about credibility a bit more. This is due in large part to the nature of the interaction. In both scenarios, there is an incentive to coordinate – everyone in the salon wants the customer to walk out happy with their new cut, and the dealer would rather sell at a lower price than not sell at all. But the tradeoffs and underlying preferences mean that a conversation at the car dealership involves more give-and-take. If you find a trustworthy dealer, you can walk away with significant benefits in the form of a good car at a good price. But there are significant costs associated with trusting a dealer too easily – if they end up being a dishonest person, you could end up with a lemon. When you are thinking about

buying a car, therefore, you might try to find ways to analyze the credibility of the dealer and their promises. You could return to a dealer that you have interacted with before, or who has good reviews (credibility via reputation); you could make them agree to throw in additional benefits or allow a trial run (credibility via sinking costs); or you could make them sign some sort of extended warranty agreement (credibility via tying hands).

Therefore, in a very simplistic way, these interactions mirror the way the international relations literature has approached the study of signaling and communication. In strategic interactions between states, there are incentives for each side to understand the intentions of their counterparts, but there are typically significant costs associated with trusting a state that turns out to be bluffing. Even the definition of credibility from Jervis et al. that I quote above goes on to discuss how the concept is usually scoped to these types of high-stakes, coercive, deterrent, or bargaining scenarios: “For credibility, we mean the extent to which an actor’s statements or implicit commitments are believed. . . Credibility is usually associated with the possibility of using force, but it can also apply to other foreign policy instruments, such as economic or diplomatic sanctions, as well as to other dimensions of policy, such as competence or consistency; in these cases, the related determinants of credibility may be similar only at the most abstract level” (Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler 2021, 169). With this final point, though, the authors leave open the idea that an examination of credibility could be broader than just the extant focus on how states distinguish honest adversaries from dishonest ones, or resolved states from those who are merely bluffing.

While acknowledging these concerns about strategic interactions in international relations, I posit that by focusing only on these high-risk scenarios, the international relations literature has not yet figured out how to approach the study of state-to-state interactions in which bluffing is less of a concern. To return to my rough metaphor, what about the hairdresser conversations? Considering the sheer number of communications between states every single day, only a fraction of which can be classified as coercive or deterrent threats,

there is room for a theory that examines communication in the quotidian conduct of foreign policy. This is where my theory of diplospeak comes in – when diplomats speak to each other all day every day about their states’ policies, reactions, and intentions, the cost of proceeding as if the message is reasonably believable is less than the cost of constantly calculating the potential credibility of every single communication. This is especially true considering that diplomats are fully capable of – in fact encouraged to – continue gathering information from various sources before, during, and after these interactions. My theory of diplospeak as a communicative tool therefore explains how diplomats can reasonably communicate with each other in a high-information environment in which stopping to calculate credibility is neither reasonable nor necessary. In the next section, I discuss the particular features of the diplomatic context that make this possible.

2.4.2 Diplospeak and the Diplomatic Context

Diplospeak does have characteristics that distinguish it from language used in conversations between friends, colleagues, or random strangers. As discussed earlier, in our daily lives, we constantly choose our words and tone to match different situations. A meeting with a boss, for example, will sound very different than complaining about the meeting to a group of friends afterwards. Levels of formality, wording choices, and even strategic restraint – we all employ these considerations on a daily basis because we know that the way we speak to and about other people will impact their assessment of us, their perception of our intentions, and how they see their relationship with us moving forward.

However, in the world of international relations, this concept is not so intuitive. This is, in part, because interactions between states are on a much grander scale, with far more high-stakes outcomes on the table. Misplaced trust between coworkers could result in an awkward office environment; misplaced trust between states could result in full-scale wars. To make matters worse, not only are the stakes higher, but there is no global HR manager

to squash potential conflicts in the international community. Again, a disagreement with a coworker is unpleasant, but very few people are actively mistrustful of their interactions with others because of a legitimate fear of bodily harm. On the state level, however, states must always fear for their survival, creating a cycle of mistrust and strong incentives to maximize one's place in the world that are difficult if not impossible to overcome. At least, this is how traditional, security-mined international relations scholarship views state interactions.³

Many scholars might therefore argue that a theory of communication via linguistic conventions cannot apply to diplospeak because the incentives for states to bluff are too high, and the consequences of falling for a bluff too severe. However, as I discussed in the previous section, there is nothing about communication via conventions that require them to be low stakes. And again, Lewis makes it quite clear that the interests of two parties do not need to be aligned for them to coordinate, or for a linguistic convention to facilitate that coordination process.

Further, I argue that there is a question that even precedes concerns about credibility of a given state signal: How does the receiving state recognize that a signal has been sent and then identify and interpret the content of the specific message? In an ideal scenario, a threat takes a very clear format – State A declares that if State B takes a certain action, they will respond in a certain way. Or, in the case of deterrence, if State B attacks, State A will take action. But, as IR scholars well know, even the most straightforward threats are rarely this clean and simple – and ambiguity is often strategic. Take the example of the Cuban Missile Crisis as analyzed by pioneering scholar Thomas Schelling who, despite extensive work on the importance of credibility and costly signaling in the context of deterrent and coercive threats, does indeed acknowledge the importance of communication in building those threat scenarios. In what Schelling called an “unusually deliberate and solemn statement, President

3. See, for example, Herz (1950), Waltz (1959), and Grieco (1988) for theoretical background on anarchy and security dilemmas in IR, and Schelling (1966), Jervis (1976, 1978), Krasner (1976), Snyder (1984), and Mearsheimer (2001) for discussions of how the structure of the international system incentivizes conflict and constrains interactions between states.

Kennedy made a public address on October 22, 1962 saying: ‘it shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union’” (1966, 40). On one hand, as Schelling further discusses, Kennedy was attempting to use automaticity – a promise to use force automatically if a certain bar of provocation is reached – to sink credibility behind his deterrent threat toward the USSR. *However*, the threat itself required several layers of interpretation first – this was an “unusually deliberate and solemn statement” – a break from prior conventions of Kennedy’s public speaking made it more noticeable and rhetorically powerful. (ibid.) He used the phrase “full retaliatory response,” a diplospeak phrase that is up for interpretation but, taken in context of existing linguistic conventions, could be reasonably understood by the USSR to mean that nuclear weapons are, at the very least, on the table. In another triumph of diplospeak – or euphemism, as it has also been called (Cyr 2022) – Kennedy announced a “quarantine” around Cuba, a phrase deliberately chosen to avoid the more escalatory imposition of a “blockade.” In short, the evolving nature of the threats issued by Kennedy – *including specific wording* – leading up to and during the crisis also played a role in how commitments were calculated both at the time and in subsequent analyses of the incident.

On the other end of the threat spectrum, think about one of the most infamous incidents of backing down from an explicit threat in recent years – when President Obama issued a statement imposing a “red line” in Syria regarding the use of chemical weapons and subsequently failed to act. Analyses have, understandably, focused on the issuance of this threat, the decision to back down (albeit via Congress), and possible consequences for American reputation (Harvey and Mitton 2015; Lin-Greenberg 2019; Lupton 2020; Burns and Stravers 2020; Croco, Hanmer, and McDonald 2021). But what about “red line” itself? How did those two words come to be associated with a coercive threat in the diplospeak vocabulary?

Did Syria understand it the same way? These types of questions surely have a place in the conversation about threats in international relations in addition to analyses about credible commitments, costly signaling, and reputations for resolve.

To be clear, nothing about my theory aims to dismiss legitimate concerns about bluffing, or contradicts the existing IR literature on strategies for how to make signals more credible. All of that is going on in parallel, as states send and receive all kinds of signals at a breakneck pace every single day. The purpose of my argument is therefore not to argue against the idea that states may need strategies to boost the credibility of their signals in order to convince their counterparts that they are not bluffing. Instead, I suggest that there is more to effective state-to-state communication than just credibility calculations. If states spelled out all their threats perfectly, we could jump straight to calculations of how credible a given statement is. But in reality, it took an understanding of diplomatic conventions to interpret Kennedy's threats for what they were.

As O'Neill (2001) puts it in his work on symbolism and honor in international relations, "Communicating clearly. . . is different from communicating credibly. The credibility question asks why the receiver should believe what the sender is saying, and many game models have addressed it." Instead, O'Neill suggests focusing on "how the receiver understands what the sender is saying" (10). Again, credibility is an incredibly important aspect of state-to-state communication, one that the IR literature rightly focuses on. With this discussion, I hope to supplement the extant literature by opening up this discussion to also include verbal communication outside of coercive or deterrent scenarios, and show when, how, and why diplomats are able to use their rhetoric to make themselves understood.

2.4.3 Summary

As this discussion has made clear, while diplomacy is a special case with its own important context and features, those features do not negate the power of diplospeak conventions to

facilitate communication between states. While it is true that diplomacy is often high stakes, and that there are heightened incentives to lie because of the anarchic international system, those concerns run in parallel to, not over, the communicative power of diplospeak. Further, a study of diplospeak conventions can shed light on how states communicate specific policies – even coercive threats. Specifically, I ask how states understand those diplospeak messages to be signals and how they interpret them. Even within the most conflictual relationship, there may be incentives to coordinate around some things – setting the rules of the “game,” limiting escalation, understanding positions, etc. In short, despite state incentives to misrepresent their intentions, diplomats can – and as I will show in the rest of this dissertation, do – still gain useful information in sending and receiving rhetorical signals, even if they are also gathering other sources of information to analyze the credibility of both verbal and kinetic signals.

2.5 Theory of Diplospeak

In my approach to describing the dual processes of how conventions of diplospeak are created and how, once established, they facilitate state-to-state communications, I follow Terman (2023)’s relationalist approach, itself inspired by Jackson and Nexon (2019). This allows me to analyze a snapshot of interaction within a continuous circle of communication back and forth between states. In particular, I mirror Terman’s approach to examining the process of human rights shaming as a whole rather than focusing on causes to the exclusion of outcomes, or vice versa. Because the interactions between shamer and target (or, in my case, speaker and listener) are strategic, social, and ongoing, she conceptualizes her theory of shaming as one that analyzes “the causes and consequences of norm enforcement together as a coherent system” (22).

As I lay out the process by which diplospeak actually facilitates strategic communication between states on a daily basis, keep in mind the assumptions established above from

linguistic philosophy literature: that meaning is language in use, that the specific context of an utterance matters, and that conventions of use drive understanding. For diplospeak, this means that diplomats become experts in the diplomatic language game as well as the various language games contained therein – the US-UK relationship language game, the North Korea-South Korea relationship language game, the human rights language game, etc. Once that context is established, officials turn to their rolodex of known diplospeak terms, comparing an utterance to what is expected in a given language game. In an adversarial language game, for example, diplomats have an established set of terms and a certain tone – words that have gained their particular communicative meaning through continuous, conventional use.

It is important to emphasize that I do not claim that all state rhetoric is created equal; in fact, certain words and phrases come to have additional meaning through conventional use. This is particularly important to the function of diplospeak in the real-life practice of diplomacy; if all words are important all the time, it would be impossible to keep up or to know when to pay particularly close attention. Therefore, I propose below five buckets of diplospeak that have emerged as particularly important and useful in state communications. This is not meant to be exhaustive; there are certainly other types (and sub-types) that are likely of theoretical and empirical interest. But for the time being I introduce these five categories both to give a better idea of how these words and phrases are deployed in practice, and to preview my empirical strategy for the rest of this dissertation, which focuses on analyzing two of these types of diplospeak in depth.

2.5.1 Types of Diplospeak

As discussed above, some conventions come more naturally than others; when a new convention emerges, senders and receivers can rely on existing contextual knowledge, social norms, and prior conventions to make sense of a new rhetorical signal, even one without

specific precedent. This begs the question, though – in practice, what types of conventions are most natural in diplomatic communications? In this section, I introduce five categories of diplospeak conventions that have become particularly salient and useful for states when communicating with each other. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, although these categories cover a broad range of communicative activities that a state may want to carry out in the practice of their foreign policy. The point is that these types of diplospeak conventions are particularly relevant for states both in the types of policy communication they may want to carry out, as well as their relation to underlying social and contextual norms (i.e. diplomatic protocols). Below, I describe each type and provide a recent example of how they have been deployed.

1) Diplospeak that *defines a relationship*

In social communication, one of the most important things to establish is the relationship between two parties. Again, language games that play out within a friendship are drastically different than those within a rivalry. On the diplomatic level, it is important for states to define their relationships too, something that this category of diplospeak helps them do.

These diplospeak phrases can range from the most obvious terms like “friend,” “close ally,” or, on the other hand, “enemy.” But these phrases can also evolve in specific relationships, becoming identifiable conventions in those particular contexts. This is where we see things like “special relationship” – terms that really do not mean much on their own but become symbolically associated with specific diplomatic relationships.

For example, the phrase “as close as lips and teeth” is one that analysts have used as an indicator of the strength of ties between North Korea and China. Although the original use from Mao Zedong has more of a connotation of North Korea’s usefulness to China (“If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold”), thanks to continual use, the phrase “as close as lips and teeth” has long been seen as a phrase used to affirm the tight nature of Chinese-North Korean relations. During a nadir of relations between the two sides in the mid- to late-2010s,

the lips and teeth seemed remarkably far apart, and the phrase fell out of style, which was seen as a sign that the two sides were not as close as they once were. Nevertheless, it is still used from time to time, particularly in contexts where China is trying to emphasize improving relations between Beijing and Pyongyang. For example, in 2018, when reporting on responses to the news of a surprise meeting between Kim and Xi in China, the CCP-run People's Daily included a comment from Weibo reading "Mountains and rivers depend on each other, and lips and teeth are connected. The friendship between the Chinese and Korean peoples has a long history, and good neighborliness and friendship are the common wishes of the Chinese and Korean peoples" (Chen 2018).

2) Diplospeak that *conveys respect*

The second type of diplospeak phrase is drawn straight from the protocol books, often appearing in the form of official titles and formal names. Protocol books have extensive lists of how to call every single official that a diplomat might encounter, as well as formal names for different political entities. In describing the function of protocol, diplomacy scholar Robert Harmon noted both that “protocol is rooted in the sound knowledge of human relationships” and that “it is both practical and purposeful in that it reflects the observance of mutual respect and consideration among nations. . . It is the recognized system of international courtesy” (Harmon 1971, 38). However, these rules of protocol are not written in stone, and strategic use of different names has been used to signal (dis)respect, policy stances, and more.

Take, for example, the United States’ continued use of the name “Burma” for the Southeast Asian nation also known as Myanmar. The decision to use one name over another in state protocol is far from a neutral bureaucratic choice, especially given the historic and political implications wrapped up in both of the potential names for that country. As a “note” in the current CIA Factbook reads: “The deposed parliamentary government have promoted the name Myanmar as a conventional name for their state; the US Government

has not officially adopted the name” (“Burma” 2024). An archived State Department Fact Sheet dated December 2003 is even more blunt: “Although the SPDC changed the name of the country to ‘Myanmar,’ the democratically elected Parliament of 1990 does not recognize the name change, and the democratic opposition maintains use of the name, ‘Burma.’ Due to unyielding support of the democratically elected leaders, the U.S. Government likewise uses ‘Burma’” (“Burma” 2003). This naming convention stands out in part because the name has been both explicitly and implicitly associated with U.S. policy. Changes in the convention are both noticeable and assessed as a policy signal; when then-President Obama used both “Burma” and “Myanmar” during a visit to the country in 2012, it was seen as an important signal of the administration’s warming relations with the country at the time, even making headline news (Memmott 2012).

3) Diplospeak that *shames others*

Shaming behavior, in which states call out the actions of other states in order to gather international attention, is of growing interest in the international relations literature. Indeed, as Terman and Byun (2022) show, there are incredibly political patterns to state shaming behavior at the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR), both in terms of who is shamed and what they are shamed for. Looking at the rhetoric of state shaming choices, the authors take an approach similar to what I lay out in my theory. For them, the way states shame each other over time builds into predictable patterns in terms of which topics are covered in UPR documents between allies and between adversaries. At the same time, however, if and when states break with those established conventions – for example, by deviating the status quo and using harsh condemnatory language for an ally – it is noticeable and significant. In today’s news, this can be seen in calls for certain language to be applied to a state like Israel. There is pressure for the United States to use stronger shaming language for their ally in large part because it is seen as a significant marker of shifts in policy; if the U.S. condemns Israeli actions after avoiding it for so long, the break in convention becomes

meaningful.

At the same time, shaming conventions can arise that run counter to political expectations, but nevertheless become part of a status quo. The best example of this might be the conversation around whaling, which largely centers around the few states that still engage in the practice – Iceland, Japan, and Norway.⁴ When anti-whaling nations, specifically the United States, reversed course and put a moratorium on commercial whaling on their agenda in the early 1970s, it came as a surprise to the Japanese. In addition to direct bilateral diplomacy (Nishikawa 2020), the United States issued quite harsh public statements, including one from the Secretary of the Interior Robert Morton in December, 1971 that he was “keenly disappointed” by the fact that Soviet and Japanese whaling fleets set sail that year without any international observers, and said it would be “barbarous” to stand idly by and let the slaughter of whales continue (Dingell 1971). Nevertheless, when a moratorium was indeed put on the agenda at the UN Conference on the Human Environment in June 1972, a former Japanese official who was involved in the conference recalled being “flabbergasted” and “stabbed in the back” (Nishikawa 2020). A diplospeak convention had started to take hold, one that would have warned the Japanese of a stronger policy to come; but they did not understand the significance of that change at the time. Now, decades later, the United States as well as other nations including New Zealand and Australia continue to make public statements regularly decrying the practice, but these statements no longer catch those states off guard. If anything, whaling expeditions continue or even ramp up *despite* or even *because of* international backlash (Chappell 2018). Contrary to expectations that allies should not criticize each other, or at least not too harshly, a convention has formed around this exception. Now, if a state like New Zealand were to endorse the practice of whaling, or even just stopped lodging strong objections, that would actually be a noted departure from this new convention, and would likely raise questions about policy.

4. The Soviet Union was also a key player as a whaling nation as regulations and moratoria were debated throughout the 70s and 80s.

4) Diplospeak that maintains *strategic ambiguity*

Although states want to make themselves understood through their official statements, sometimes it is actually in their best interest to say as little as possible – or at least avoid taking a specific stance that may come back to bite them later. This type of speech has been described in other contexts, particularly as a way to avoid overcommitting to a particular promise or course of action, or to “float” an idea and see how the other side responds before moving forward. Peters (1955) uses the term “sign language” to describe this kind of strategic ambiguity in discussing labor-management relations. For Peters, sign language is used as “a protective device.” During negotiations, “You want to offer concession, but you want to protect yourself against rejection. You want to protect your strength even as you indicate a concession. . . .sign language enables you to offer concession without having your actions interpreted as weakness. It gives you the flexibility to move in the direction of peace – or to move back to a position of strength. . . .through symbols you convey a new position without making explicit concessions until you have received reasonable assurance of their acceptance” (153-4).

In diplospeak, this manifests in statements that are open to interpretation, that leave room for bargaining, or that avoid taking a position altogether. There are many phrases that create policy ambiguity – perhaps the most famous being the United States’ One-China Policy and approach to relations with Taiwan. Although a string of “gaffes” and omissions under the Biden Administration have called interpretations of this convention into question, that might be part of the point; by leaving specific policy positions obscured under a phrase like “One-China Policy,” both sides are able to engage without having to reconcile underlying positions that may be fundamentally at odds with one another (Lee 2022).

5) Diplospeak that *invokes legal norms*

Thus far, the rhetoric in each of these categories is more or less just talk, albeit talk that helps states communicate with each other. However, when legalistic terms and phrases

are involved, there are suddenly other enforcement mechanisms and norms wrapped up in their use (or non-use). Nevertheless, states have built up linguistic conventions around using legal terms that could then trigger those enforcement mechanisms. Terms like “refugee” have implications for policy; a state may deliberately use alternative terms like “economic migrants” or even “illegal aliens” to indicate whether they intend to invoke the underlying legal obligations associated with refugee status.

One of the most well-known examples of this is the exchange between State Department Spokesperson Christine Shelly and reporter Alan Elsner on June 10, 1994, in which he pressed for more clarity on the situation in Rwanda, leading to the infamous question: “How many acts of genocide does it take to make genocide?” (Power 2001) Later research made it clear how deliberate the avoidance of the term “genocide” was for the Clinton administration, at least for a time: “A discussion paper on Rwanda, prepared by an official in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and dated May 1, testifies to the nature of official thinking. Regarding issues that might be brought up at the next interagency working group, it stated, ‘1. Genocide Investigation: Language that calls for an international investigation of human rights abuses and possible violations of the genocide convention. *Be Careful. Legal at State was worried about this yesterday—Genocide finding could commit [the U.S. government] to actually "do something"*’” [Emphasis added by Power].

Again, the legal regime surrounding the use of the term “genocide” was clearly a factor informing rhetorical choices for the Clinton administration in April 1994. However, despite the more explicit and codified origin of the convention on when and how to use the word “genocide,” or the potential ramifications for doing so, the process played out as expected from my theory. A convention had arisen around using “genocide” to describe actions when certain criteria were met *and* when a state is willing to at least attempt to pursue a legal response. By avoiding the term so blatantly, the United States signaled that their policy did not include a legal response – at least at first. When the administration finally conceded

to public pressure and started calling the horror in Rwanda a "genocide," the switch was a clear signal of a change in Washington's policy.

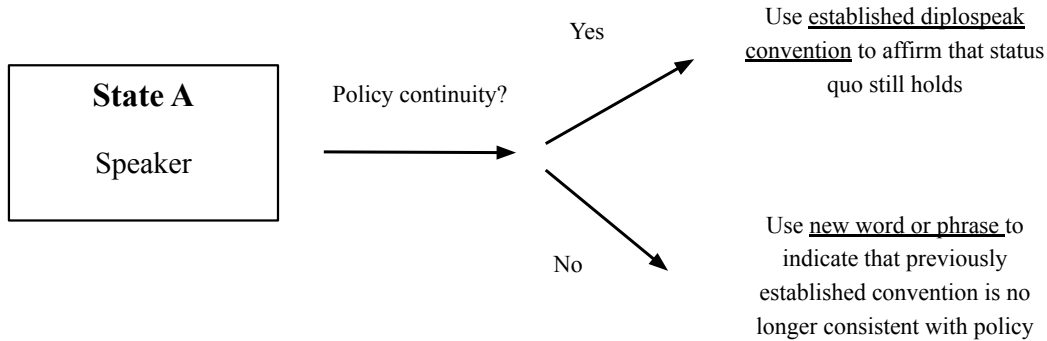
Table 2.1: Types of Diplospeak

Type	Possible Policy Goals	Examples
Define a relationship	- Reassure an ally - Escalate a hostile relationship	- China starts using “lips and teeth” again to describe its relationship with North Korea after a period of tension. - President George W. Bush labels Iran, Iraq, and North Korea the “Axis of Evil” in his 2002 State of the Union speech.
Convey respect	- Affirming a leader as part of the in-group (or expel them) - Gesture at détente with an adversary	- Using a leader’s formal title (i.e. “President” or “Chairman”) versus calling them a “dictator.” - Using the preferred name of Myanmar rather than Burma, but only after successful democratic elections.
Shame others	- Condemn (or avoid condemning) a human rights abuse - Call for a policy change using moralistic language	- Condemning violence “on all sides” in Gaza. - Calling for an end to whaling by labeling it as “barbarous.”
Maintain strategic ambiguity	- Avoid taking a specific stance on a new issue - Maintain status quo on an issue where there is intense disagreement	- Referring to the status of Taiwan using One China Policy terminology. - Israel declining to confirm the status (or even existence) of its nuclear capabilities.
Invoke legal norms	- Rally support behind action against a perceived legal issue - Avoid invocation of legal norms that may compel further action	- Emergence of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine of humanitarian intervention. - Referring to Russian action in Ukraine as “war crimes.”

2.5.2 Theory of Diplospeak in Action

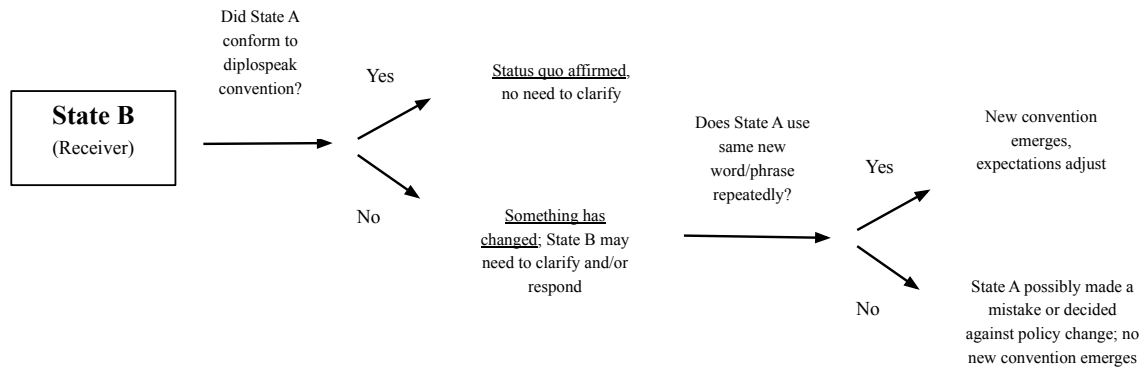
So far, I have laid out the theoretical framework for my argument about diplospeak's use in state-to-state communication. Specifically, I contend that through continual use, diplomats build up expectations around how they should speak, and around how they interpret the words of their peers. Conventions of diplospeak therefore act as reference points that diplomats can use to tie state rhetoric to policy. In this way, diplomats, speaking on behalf of their state, use conventions of diplospeak to facilitate meaningful communication. In this section, I first lay out how diplospeak conventions function once they have been established, as shown in Figure 1. I then discuss what happens when a state wants to generate a new convention or change an existing one.

Figure 2.2: Diplospeak from Speaker's Perspective



My theory of state rhetoric rests on the back of expectations. Through continued interaction in different contexts (language games), states build up expectations about what their rhetoric means (conventions). Expectations about the use of particular diplospeak phrases in specific contexts gives states a way to benchmark their policy positions; if nothing has changed in rhetoric, there is no need to question the status quo attached to that rhetoric. "We may tend to repeat the action that succeeded before if we have no strong reason to do otherwise...that is, we may each have first- and higher-order expectations that the others will

Figure 2.3: Diplospeak from Receiver's Perspective



do their parts of the old coordination equilibrium, unless they have reason to act otherwise" (Lewis 1969, 37). If you repeat a conventional action, it is likely because conditions around that action have not changed. Flipping that, however, it stands to reason that if you observe a deviation from the norm, there must have been a reason for change. The analytical question for diplomats receiving an unexpected rhetorical signal then becomes one of uncovering the underlying reason, be it a policy change, a change of heart, or even a lie. There may be many underlying reasons, and the credibility of the statement may not be immediately clear. But none of those concerns change the fact that what tipped the receiver off was a deviation from conventional expectation.

What happens, however, when a previously well-established convention keeps changing? Or if a different, previously unexpected phrase keeps appearing regularly in a language game? This is where new diplospeak conventions are born.

Through continuous exposure to and use of diplospeak, it becomes easier to figure out what potential new conventions could mean. As discussed above, linguistic conventions are not intrinsically meaningful – in fact, part of the point of conventions is that they help parties coordinate between two equally possible equilibria. Remember, if the ultimate goal is to meet up for lunch, it does not matter whether we both show up at the taco shop or the

steak place, as long as we can figure out, even without explicit discussion, where to find each other. That does not mean, however, that some conventions *themselves* do not have certain levels of naturalness or salience to them, especially when they are first being established. Again, without explicitly coordinating on a convention of where to eat lunch every week, falling into a pattern of alternating favorite restaurants *just makes sense*. It relies on other well-trodden conventions of fairness, it is patterned in a way that is easy to remember, etc. A convention of going to the taco place twice for every visit to the steak house is less obvious on its face; even less so a pattern of going to one restaurant only on even dates, or something even more convoluted. The point here is that if for the parties in the midst of a coordination problem where a convention is in the *process* of emerging, it would make sense to start by referencing known conventions and expectations.

What does this mean for conventions of diplospeak? If State A wants to send a new policy message by establishing a convention around a certain term or phrase, they can attempt to do so with literally any phrase, but some are more likely to be immediately noticed and properly understood by State B than others. In particular, reaching for other, well-established conventions that are in use in other language games, or are well-known within the “types” of diplospeak discussed above, are particularly good strategies. For example, if State A starts addressing an ally, State B, using terms it usually reserves for its adversaries, it is not a stretch to infer that the relationship may be in trouble. This concept is well-illustrated in O’Neill (2001)’s thorough examination of symbolism and symbolic messaging between states:

“The simplest kind of symbolic message is sent by taking a prototypical story or category, choosing an action that is part of the prototype, and performing that action. The action performed is the message symbol. The sender and receiver know the prototype and also have higher-level knowledge about each other’s knowledge of the prototype and this situation allows the receiver to reason from the message to the prototype it probably came from, and from there to the sender’s meaning” (11).

O’Neill uses the example of Nelson Mandela inviting his white jailer to his inauguration

in 1994, a gesture that broke with established customs and served as a powerful message of forgiveness. “The meaning of his act was clear. What was puzzling was why the world could immediately understand it. There was no prevalent custom of leaders inviting their jailers to their presidential inaugurations. Symbols are often compared to language, but somehow this kind of language is understandable the first time it is used” (6). Taking this in the context of conventions and accommodation, however, it is understandable how people were able to understand this message despite its unprecedented nature. While they may not have experience with jailers being invited to presidential inaugurations, there is a very well-established precedent of inviting important figures to political events, including inaugurations, as a way to highlight them, show priorities, or make other sorts of political statements. Therefore, people who are invited to an inauguration are assumed to be important either personally or politically (or both). People are also aware of the established relationship between a jailer and a former prisoner; they have played or at least witnessed language games in which a wronged party offers an olive branch to a perpetrator, and in the absence of specific contextual conventions are able to accommodate and therefore understand communicative choices that, as Wittgenstein said, “share a family resemblance.” This is similar to when Trump broke an established tradition by choosing not to attend Biden’s inauguration; it is the very breaking of an expectation is part of what gave these messages their meaning and power.

To give a similar example involving interaction between two states – let us say a head of state dines at the house of a former adversary. Dining at one another’s home is typical of something friends do. Therefore, by taking the action of accepting or extending an invitation, it sends the message that one side considers the other to be in the category of “friends.” One does not need to establish every single step of the messaging strategy outright – it is enough to know that existing conventions of friendship involve certain behaviors, such as dining together. This interpretation holds *even if State A’s leader has never invited State B’s leader to a dinner before*. The particular convention between those two parties has no basis in prior

interactions, and yet, the message is obvious.

This is how I argue conventions of diplospeak emerge and become consolidated – if State A wants to establish a new diplospeak convention, they can do so by referencing existing conventions; State B can recognize a totally new diplospeak phrase as important and hopefully catch its intended meaning because of established contextual knowledge and understanding of existing conventions. Thus, the naturalness of the messaging strategy and choice of which words get outsized meaning can stem from 1) application of other well-established social linguistic conventions, such as one’s title being a proxy for respect, or 2) known contextual norms and constraints – though, for example, the bureaucratization of the writing and editing process.⁵ This idea that some types of diplospeak convention arise more naturally than others has a major observable implication. If I am right that linguistic conventions are driving strategic communication between diplomats, then we should see coordination particularly around certain types of diplospeak vocabulary – for example, using names and honorifics to indicate relationships and respect, a convention which draws on broad and well-established social norms and protocols.

2.5.3 Summary

In this chapter, I have established that linguistic conventions facilitate communication, and that even in the admittedly constrained context of diplomacy, conventions diplospeak should be able to do the same. I have laid out my theory of diplospeak as a mechanism for meaningful communication between states, both in terms of its day-to-day function and how it enables states to signal moments of change.

To summarize my argument, I now give a final example of how this has played out in practice. This story describes the United States, the signal sender, making a diplospeak utterance that does not conform to the established convention. Greece and Macedonia, the

5. This process will be covered in depth in Chapter 3.

signal receiver(s), immediately take notice, and try to clarify the underlying policy intentions behind this change. After clarifying several times, and the United States stubbornly sticking to the new convention, it becomes solidified; a new convention is born, and State B no longer takes notice. Note the relationalist approach in action here – the back-and-forth between the signal sender and receiver(s) involved multiple iterations of both Figure 1 and Figure 2 in going back and forth to establish a newly consolidated naming convention.

In his memoir, career Foreign Service Officer and former Ambassador to Macedonia (among other senior appointments) Christopher Hill described his attempts to establish conventions about formal names in the Balkans in the aftermath of conflict there:

“The United States had not recognized Macedonia’s constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia, and instead followed the absurd moniker ‘the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,’ or FYROM. It was not only absurd, but most Macedonians found it insulting as well, an excessive effort to placate the Greek public (and Greek Americans as well). Use of the name Macedonia out of the context of the FYROM absurdity by any U.S. government official would provoke a swift protest against our State Department in Washington, or the U.S. Embassy in Athens. Often the State Department spokesperson, Nicholas Burns, would be blindsided by a question from a Greek journalist about the use of the name Macedonia by an obscure U.S. official at an obscure international conference somewhere. The journalists would ask, ‘Does this represent a change of policy?’ which of course it did not, a fact that Burns would always confirm. The obscure official would then be hunted down and admonished for such careless nomenclature. With the U.S.-Greek relationship always burdened by Greece’s frustrations about the U.S.-Turkish relationship, and by U.S. frustrations with Greece over a wide range of issues, including Greek management of its own terrorist problems, the last thing those working on Greece wanted was still another issue to complicate the relationship. The consequence was that the embassy in Athens became one of the primary enforcers of the name issue. Meanwhile, in Skopje, I could hardly go around calling the country to which I had been accredited by the name FYROM if I was to have any relationships or influence with anybody in the country. Nobody in Macedonia had any intention of changing the name of the country over Greek sensitivities. I started avoiding using the word FYROM by referring to ‘your country’ or, better yet, ‘your beautiful country.’ People liked that at first, but soon understood the gymnastics I was employing to avoid the name issue. ‘So, Mr. Ambassador, thank you for thinking our country is beautiful. But could you tell us what exactly is the name of our beautiful country?’ Finally, after a few months of this, I gave in and started referring to Macedonia as Macedonia.

Our embassy in Athens immediately objected, asking whether perhaps the Greek press had misquoted me. I told them no, I was correctly quoted, and that I was done using FYROM. The protests went away, and the press spokesman in Washington began to give such a dry, formulaic response to the Greek journalists that even they got tired of asking. The Greek desk at the State Department ignored the issue, and no one in the front office of the European Bureau complained to me. Deputy Secretary Talbott came out to Macedonia in March 1998 and gave a serious and scholarly speech at the Academy of Sciences in which he referred to Macedonia. A few protests ensued in Greece, but it was over. I explained to Deputy Chief of Mission Paul Jones, ‘Sometimes the best way to change a policy is neither to ask for permission or forgiveness, but to just do it’” (Hill 2015, 119).

In the story above, Ambassador Hill perfectly illustrates how a deviation from an established diplospeak convention – the use of “FYROM” – immediately raised red flags for Greece, who had a well-established dispute over the name “Macedonia.” When the American ambassador used the disputed name, Greece naturally assumed 1) there was a change in underlying policy that would trigger a deviation from the governing diplospeak convention and 2) the change was meant to signal an American move in Macedonia’s favor, an assumption based on established naming conventions. Naturally, Greece protested the change and requested an explanation. After the U.S. continued to use the new name, while explicitly clarifying its position and without making other moves to change policy, a new diplospeak convention eventually solidified around using Macedonia instead of FYROM to refer to the Balkan state. Even though Greece still maintained the naming dispute formally, they no longer took American use of the name Macedonia as a signal of broader U.S. policy in the region, but as a shorthand used by American diplomats tired of using a convoluted acronym. In other words, a convention emerged matching the meaning of the name Macedonia to its actual use in practice.

2.6 Conclusion

Thinking about my theory in the most simplistic form: if meaning is language in use, and diplomats use vocabularies of diplospeak in certain, patterned ways, then diplospeak con-

ventions can be used to create meaning. While this may be true and a helpful framework to lay out my theory in the most parsimonious way, there are nonetheless a few more specific observable implications that should hold if my theory is to be believed. First, if I am right, then states will take their diplomatic rhetoric seriously, and they will take some rhetoric more seriously than others (namely key diplospeak terms, as discussed in the previous section). Second, the words that are taken more seriously by states when crafting their official rhetoric will include socially constructed words and phrases rather than just those that are more instrumentally useful in policy.

To summarize, if I am right that diplomatic rhetoric matters in state-to-state communication, we should see diplomats taking their words seriously; and if I am right that diplospeak is an effective tool for this communicative process, we should see diplomats taking some rhetoric more seriously than others. The rest of this dissertation will aim to empirically show that these two phenomena do exist in foreign policymaking.

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CHAPTER 3

ORIGINS OF DIPLOMATIC RHETORIC

3.1 Introduction

On the afternoon of March 27, 2023, Vedant Patel, Principal Deputy Spokesperson for the US State Department, climbed up to the podium to face the press corps. For 45 minutes, he addressed questions about US policy positions on issues spanning nearly every corner of the world, regularly referring down to his notes for guidance along the way. “Democratic principles have always been and must remain a hallmark of the US-Israel relationship,” he declared. “Our ultimate goal here continues to remain the same, which is the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” “To the extent that the Taliban is looking for more normal relations with countries around the world, that will not happen in a long time, so [long] as they continue to advance these repressive edicts against women and girls” (Patel 2023).

This manner of speaking is immediately recognizable to those that follow the State Department’s public statements, featuring several mainstays of diplomatic rhetoric: “Democratic principles,” “hallmark” of a relationship, “complete denuclearization,” “repressive edicts.” Out of context, these phrases seem like the perfect examples of what multiple presidents have called bureaucratic “gobbledygook” (President Truman in 1957, and President Kennedy in 1963) (Benjamin 1957; Schlesinger 1965). If these phrases are truly nonsensical, though, why do foreign policy bureaucracies consistently speak this way? How do they become so recognizable if they are truly just meant to say as little as possible? And why does it become such an issue when the established rules of such “gobbledygook” are seemingly broken?

As I laid out in chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation, contrary to these stereotypes, “diplospeak” – the language of diplomats – is not a collection of meaningless, ambiguous platitudes that officials use to avoid taking a clear stance on issues. Instead, through repeated

use over time, diplospeak has developed into a set of linguistic conventions designed to help states communicate with each other. When a state sticks to established conventions of diplospeak, such as insisting that the “hallmark” of the US-Israeli relationship is “democratic principles,” this affirms the status quo of that relationship despite turmoil in the region. When, however, the same phrase is used in relation to Venezuelan President Maduro in the aftermath of a widely challenged election, it could be seen as support for the protesters demanding electoral transparency (Patel 2024). Far from gobbledygook, these phrases, by virtue of their continued use combined with knowledge about the context in which they are being used, can convey a significant amount of policy information.

Before examining the vocabulary of diplospeak and how it communicates meaning, it is first important to establish how official state language comes to exist in the first place. The process by which diplomats draft, edit, and disseminate language on behalf of their states sheds light on the iterative and deliberate nature of diplomatic language; understanding this process is therefore key to my study of diplospeak conventions and their strategic use in state communications. I begin this chapter by describing the typical process that prepared language goes through before landing on the spokesperson’s desk, as well as discussing the thought processes that diplomats use when drafting their own diplospeak and assessing statements from their foreign counterparts. This account is based on interviews with American and South Korean officials, all of whom have direct experience on both the production and reception sides of diplomatic rhetoric. I conducted 13 interviews with current and former State Department officials, including four people who have served as either Department Spokesperson or Deputy Spokesperson. Others served at varying levels of seniority within the department bureaucracy, including at the level of office director, coordinating the drafting and clearance process for their regional or functional specialty, or as desk officers, often tasked with drafting for official statements and checking off (“clearing”) statements drafted in other offices. On the Korean side, I similarly conducted nine interviews with officials who

worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Trade and Finance, and/or in the president's office. Of these nine interviewees, seven had the rank of ambassador.

Below, I begin by recalling my theory of diplospeak as a form of linguistic convention that helps states coordinate around meaning. I then discuss how this need to meaningfully communicate between diplomats creates incentives for bureaucrats to behave in patterned ways that are traceable over time and across issue areas. The drafting, editing, and approval process for official state rhetoric is highly bureaucratized and formal. However, this does not mean that there is not variation in how officials go about creating diplospeak. Indeed, in this chapter I show that depending on the issue area, bureaucrats will spend more or less time working to get every word "right" – issues with high foreign policy importance and high risk for misunderstanding will get the most bureaucratic attention, while issues with lower importance and/or lower risk will get less.

I then turn to a qualitative discussion of the process through which officials create their rhetoric, showing how it incentivizes diplomats to stick to established rhetorical conventions in order to clearly communicate policy positions to their counterparts. On the reception side, I show how my interviewees rely on core diplospeak vocabulary to cut through the noise and glean meaningful insights about other states through their rhetoric. Finally, I conclude this chapter by introducing a corpus of drafted statements from the State Department, using computational text analysis to show how the processes described by my interviewees aggregate into traceable patterns of bureaucratic behavior.

In short, this chapter builds on my theory of diplospeak by drawing out observable implications for bureaucrats as they work every day to create official state rhetoric on a variety of topics. Depending on the importance and risk associated with a given issue, bureaucrats will spend more time working to avoid any potential communicative missteps. I see this both in my quantitative text data, which clearly shows variation in bureaucratic effort depending on the topic covered in a particular document, as well as through my interviews with diplomats

who themselves went through this process in their day-to-day lives.

3.2 Theory

3.2.1 Theory of Variation in Diplospeak Writing

In this dissertation, I argue that diplospeak – the language of diplomats – is a set of vocabulary based on incentives to coordinate around shared meaning. This need to communicate between diplomats shapes the words they choose and how they interpret and analyze word choices from their diplomatic counterparts. As I discuss in the next chapters of this dissertation, this manifests in certain symbolic words and phrases that can come to exemplify the US-South Korea bilateral relationship (Chapter 4), as well as patterns of rhetorical respect that map onto policy decisions behind the scenes (Chapter 5). A theory of the implications of coordination around shared meaning, however, begs the question of where this coordination comes from.

In the broader theory, I argue there are incentives to coordinate around meaning and that the existence of concerns over credibility does not preclude diplomats from communicating meaningfully with each other. That does not, however, mean that all communication is perfectly coordinated and certainly not without effort. In the international sphere, with such a wide range of relationships, issue areas, and shifting circumstances, there will also be variation in how easy it is to create and maintain diplospeak conventions. In this chapter, I expand upon this implication to show that the easier it is for a state to maintain the rhetorical status quo in a given issue area, the less bureaucratic effort needs to be exhausted in the drafting and editing of official statements. I therefore hypothesize that assignment of bureaucratic effort is based on two factors: 1) importance of the issue at hand, and 2) the risk of miscommunication.

Importance of an issue is relatively straightforward. Some issues or relationships are

Table 3.1: Inputs to Bureaucratic Clearance Behavior

		Importance	
		High Importance	Low Importance
Risk	High Miscommunication Risk	HIGH CLEARANCE NUMBER Ex. Nuclear proliferation, China, Iraq War	MEDIUM CLEARANCE NUMBER Ex. Civil rights in Zimbabwe or Burma
	Low Miscommunication Risk	MEDIUM CLEARANCE NUMBER Ex. Established alliances (South Korea, Japan, NATO)	LOW CLEARANCE NUMBER Ex. Consular/admin issues, small or neutral countries

higher priority than others — military and security policy, relationships with large or rising powers, or maintenance of alliances in vital regions. In those cases, the importance of the issue means that it is worth expending additional effort to ensure that mistakes are not made in the sending of rhetorical signals. The first assertion of this chapter is therefore: *When an issue addressed in an official policy statement is of high strategic importance, sending states will exert additional bureaucratic effort in drafting and clearing the statement.*

On the other hand, some issues carry a naturally higher or lower risk for miscommunication, largely based on the routinization and consistency of the issue or relationship. For issues that do not experience many exogenous changes, or for which lines of communication are broad and well-maintained (i.e. with those vital alliances), the risk for miscommunication is relatively low. The rhetorical status quo is more easily maintained when there is relatively little exogenous need to change existing conventions. And when lines of communication are well-maintained and diversified, any potential mistakes or deviations can be easily clarified. Therefore, my second assertion is: *When there is a high risk for miscommunication in a given policy statement, states will exert additional bureaucratic effort in drafting and clearing the statement.*

Figure 1 illustrates how these two independent variables — importance and miscom-

munication risk — interact to create high, medium, or low levels of expected bureaucratic effort. For topics with high importance and high miscommunication risk, states will invest significantly in making sure that their words are properly delivered to listening states. If an issue is either high importance but low risk, or low importance but high risk, then there will be medium levels of bureaucratic scrutiny. Finally, for issue areas that are relatively unimportant or have minimal miscommunication risk, states will invest a minimal amount of time into perfecting their words.

Alternative Explanations of Bureaucratic Behavior

It is possible that this behavior by state officials may simply be manifestations of individual or aggregate bureaucratic incentives rather than concerns over state communication per se. Officials may merely be thinking about their own career incentives, demonstrating strong risk aversion by sticking to the status quo, or trying to get “in” on more politically salient issues in order to advance their own careers. Both of these explanations would drive clearance numbers up, especially for issues with high foreign policy importance. However, neither of these explanations explain the variation in behavior that I find in the data. If bureaucracies are just risk averse in general, we would see high clearance numbers across the board, and especially high numbers for risky topic areas. And if bureaucrats were just driven by pure self-interest to get their name on a clearance page for a highly important issue, we would see more clearances for high importance issues regardless of risk. Instead, what I find is that there is variation in clearance behavior not just based on one or the other of these factors, but the interaction between them.

Further, an argument about this type of interaction between bureaucratic incentives and constraints is not incompatible with my story. For example, if the argument is about risk aversion, this begs the question – risk of what? Within the context of drafting and disseminating official state rhetoric, the risk that these bureaucrats may be concerned about is

creating confusion, deviating from established policy, or causing diplomatic messes that their superiors then have to clean up. This is very much compatible with my story of diplospeak, in which deviations from the status quo should be undertaken carefully and with intention to avoid confusion. Indeed, as I will discuss later in this chapter, officials are very much aware of this and do indeed discuss preference for status quo and risk avoidance, but *because they are worried about adverse consequences of confusion abroad*. Bureaucratic constraints and individual incentives are therefore quite compatible with my argument.

3.2.2 Summary

My theory of diplomatic conventions based on conventional use of representative phrases implies certain patterns that should be tradable both in bureaucratic behavior and in the rhetorical output that results from that behavior. Above, I describe how characteristics of different official statements — the importance and risk level of the issue at hand — combine to create different levels of bureaucratic activity designed to ensure proper communication between states. In the rest of this chapter, I use a combination of qualitative and quantitative evidence to show how this plays out in the context of the United States State Department, specifically in the preparation of rhetoric for the department’s Daily Press Briefing. In so doing, I demonstrate from the input side how diplospeak involves variation in effort specifically based on how easy or difficult it is to maintain an established pattern of diplomatic rhetoric. This chapter therefore provides evidence that states take their rhetoric seriously, but not just for the sake of rhetoric itself — they systematically take their words more seriously based on their instrumental communicative value.

3.3 Diplospeak in Practice

Drafting Diplospeak

There are a wide variety of official statements that are produced by foreign policy bureaucracies like the State Department, including daily statements commenting on breaking news, as well as longer-term projects like annual reports, fact sheets, blog posts, and more. For all of these documents, officials across the bureaucracy are tasked with drafting, editing, and ultimately signing off on the specific language used – a process called “clearance.” Clearance ensures that any office with a stake in the topic at hand can lend their expertise and contextual knowledge to a statement before it is disseminated more broadly within the government or for public consumption.

This process of clearing official language takes place constantly for all these different types of documents. To see how this plays out daily on an incredibly tight timeline, I turn specifically to the process of preparing press guidance – drafted language that the spokesperson can use to “guide” their responses from the podium – for the Department’s Daily Press Briefing. Preparation for press briefings highlights a microcosm of the clearance process, illustrating how officials approach the wording of statements and how the constraints of this process incentivize them to rely on well-established diplospeak vocabulary to maintain the rhetorical status quo.

Each morning, officials within the Global Public Affairs Bureau (formerly the Public Affairs Bureau), begin preparing for the Daily Press Briefing. The first order of business is to examine any important news of the day, and come up with a list of relevant questions that journalists may ask at that afternoon’s briefing. For example, if a major natural disaster hit Canada, press officers would likely predict questions that may arise about the situation on the ground, the US response, and more. In anticipation of this discussion, requests for guidance would go out to the responsible regional office within the department (in this hypothetical,

probably the Office of Canadian Affairs within the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs), where staff would draft notes and prepare language for the spokesperson to use in the press briefing. Various officials – from a handful up to dozens of people – will be asked to “clear” the drafted language before it becomes finalized. In this process, the number of clearances attached to a given guidance document can add up quickly – and vary widely – depending on the topics covered.

In my interviews with both American and Korean diplomats, they discussed in detail their personal approach to clearing state language. For them, first and foremost, language is tied to policy, and the main goal of drafting and approving a document is to ensure that it accurately represents the underlying state policy in question. But in addition to that, it is not enough to just represent or interpret policy in general; there are specific key terms and phrases that become associated with policy and are codified through the clearance process. Interviewees from both the US and South Korea repeatedly pointed out that deviations from an established linguistic norm will prompt questions, so they deliberately stick with the same language unless they really mean to make a change. Indeed, officials want to avoid “generating news” by changing an established word or phrase: “There is a feeling that a departure from the existing messaging is significant, and so all that had to be submitted to a much larger process of debate... I think the more consistent you are with messaging the more the smallest shift means something. If you’re a person or an institution that kind of mouths off or randomly says lots of things, what you say can easily be dismissed. But if you’re extremely careful and consistent with your messaging, change one adjective and people will notice” (US Interview 1). This interviewee gave the example of US statements about South Korea – if Seoul is used to hearing that the bilateral relationship is “concrete and authentic,” a statement that includes the phrase “concrete, authentic, and credible” will prompt questions about the addition of “credible,” and diplomats analyzing this statement will speculate about the potential message behind the change. Is the United States adding

“credible” because they haven’t found the relationship credible to this point? Is it part of a larger shift in posture toward the region? Rather than inviting unnecessary questions with new vocabulary, officials say it is safer to stick to the rhetorical status quo unless a change has a specific purpose.

In addition to following policy, the clearance process also follows practical considerations. The turnaround time to prepare guidance for the Daily Press Briefing is incredibly tight, especially if a large number of offices need to clear the language used. For officials, this means that they do not have much time, and it is therefore better to find statements that have already been approved and use the exact same language again. In practice, this continues to codify the same diplospeak terms over time. “As far as drafting before sending out for review, the culture was that if that issue had been addressed in some way before that we should try as much as possible to use existing language. And so there would be a quick search, if we didn’t already know, to see what we’d said before. [Then there] almost always would be slight tweaks for the specific context of the day, plus existing language and very brief sentences straying as little as possible” (US Interview 1). In short, the goal of officials within the foreign policy bureaucracy is not to *make* policy, but to communicate existing policy and, to the extent possible, “reduce friction” with partner governments (US Interview 5).

This point is worth emphasizing, because this theme came up constantly in my interviews – even if these officials could not pinpoint a specific policy consequence that might arise out of using the “wrong” phraseology in an official statement, they all recognized that 1) there is a right and wrong way to say things, with the “right” way nearly always being the status quo, that 2) counterparts and/or the media are likely to notice if there is a deviation, and that 3) the risk of confusion or need for clarification, especially out in the public, is enough to be cautious about sticking to the status quo unless there is a specific, purposeful, and strategic reason to shift established phrasing.

In addition, hierarchy still matters when it comes to diplospeak. My interviewees pointed out that to some extent, diplospeak trickles down. Once State Department headquarters in DC says something, for example, embassies work off of that document and continue to use the same approved language in their future statement. In particular, if the president says something, everyone can refer to that and use similar, if not identical, language when drafting and clearing their own rhetoric in the future; when a wording choice comes from the top, it becomes “gospel” and will be used regularly in future official statements (US Interview 9). This process, and clearance in general, helps ensure that diplomatic rhetoric is standardized across agencies and offices, and very much incentivizes inertia in diplospeak vocabulary. Further, it means that when a senior-level official makes a change, it is more likely to be seen as a strategic choice – that there is some sort of “purpose” behind the choice (US Interview 3).

That being said, changes can and do happen. Individual diplomats or offices can sometimes suggest or run statements up the chain of command, or submit press guidance on their area of expertise to the press office without being asked. However, unless they come from the very top, these changes require bureaucratic and political investment, so my interviewees said they only escalate issues to higher levels if it is really important to them, and always with policy in mind. In cases of bureaucratic deadlock (i.e. between bureaus with incompatible equities), raising the issue to higher levels of the bureaucracy can resolve a disagreement, but the officials must choose when it is worth raising an issue and when to just let it go. This means that if a diplomat feels strongly about changing the wording of an established diplospeak phrase, it is possible to do so, but they know it will be an uphill battle, and the change must be justified on policy grounds. This makes this type of bottom-up linguistic change quite rare; it is far more likely for a change to come from the top, where policy itself is made.¹

1. See the discussion in the Introduction of Neumann ethnographic work on speechwriting in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for more on the top-down versus bottom-up process of change in foreign policy

Finally, interviewees pointed out that the more “sensitive” an issue, the more careful they are with the exact wording of their statements. Guidance on issues of great importance to US national security, for example, or those that relate to ongoing policy concerns, are drafted most carefully and read verbatim at the podium. This is because, again, officials tasked with speaking on behalf of their state are meant to reflect policy, not to make it; my interviewees were particularly concerned with using language that could jeopardize ongoing talks, or even just imply negative perceptions of an important bilateral relationship. Even choosing to “call out” a country for their conduct involves “inherent consequences.” This is not to say that officials will not raise these issues, it merely means that overcoming potential political costs and natural inclination not to call others out is actually a deliberate effort and reflects strong will within the bureaucracy.

In sum, conventions of diplospeak are consolidated over time through the features and incentives of the clearance process. The need to clear wording through various offices, the quick turnaround time, and concerns about getting ahead of policy all incentivize diplomats to stick to the rhetorical status quo whenever possible. This results in a consolidation of established diplospeak conventions that come to be tied to specific issues or relationships. That being said, these conventions can and do get broken, but only if there is a deliberate decision to make a shift based on the relevant policy. In the next section, I discuss how conventions are viewed from the recipient’s side and how they interpret both consistent, conventional use of diplospeak as well as moments of rhetorical change.

3.3.1 Reading Diplospeak

My interviewees emphasized that they actively keep the reception of their words in mind when drafting statements. This is at least in part because they know that just as they use rhetorical expectations to analyze statements from other diplomats, those diplomats

bureaucracies (Neumann 2007).

are paying attention to their words in the same way. In fact, when asked how they go about analyzing policy statements, interviewees said they first draw upon their contextual knowledge and understanding about the relationship or issue in question, *especially* thinking about how the issue has been talked about before. When officials notice variations in how an issue is presented, they take these changes as indicators that policy may be shifting, my interviewees explained. In short, diplomats keep tabs on their areas of expertise using diplospeak as a shortcut to cut through the noise of constant communication: “The key is whether you can really grasp [meaning] among thousands of words” (Korean Interview 6).

One of my interviews in Seoul illustrates this point perfectly. A former ambassador showed up to the interview location with several printed out statements to illustrate how he went about analyzing diplomatic language (Korean Interview 7). On one printout, a statement from the United Nations spokesperson about the North Korean nuclear issue, he had highlighted several key phrases: “there is room for diplomatic engagement”; engagement is “the only pathway to sustainable peace”; the goal is the “complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” On another printout, he highlighted terms in a Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement about Japan: the ROK “strongly protests” Japanese statements about disputed islands, which they called “unjust sovereignty claims.” To emphasize: when asked how he assesses statements, the former diplomat began by pulling out specific phrases that he said make clear, at least to him, the status of policy on those issues. Returning to the concept of language games, remember that the rules of communication are different in different contexts. This is how these particular phrases stood out to this former diplomat – he knew, based on his experience, that these were the key phrases to highlight. Further, if any changes appeared in subsequent statements, the shift in language would surely stand out and prompt further analysis.

This process was mirrored in a former American diplomat’s description of how he assessed any changes in policy statements analyzed by Korea Desk in the State Department: “I would

try to figure out what the underlying politics of it was and what they were trying to signal and to whom. I was a big proponent of combing the South Korean foreign ministry's statements and identifying seemingly new trends of messaging...we did that obsessively over North Korean statements and saw the smallest meaning in little changes – we think that is a necessity with the scarcity of certain types of information coming from North Korea. But in fact it's a methodology that works with any bureaucracy because they're so precise and consistent" (US Interview 1).

The context-dependent nature of diplospeak also means that these assessments are significantly different depending on the issue at hand. The rules of a language game played between allies, for example, are quite different from those of a game between adversaries. With allies, there is more open and explicit discussion and coordination on language, as well as generally more consistent policy, and therefore messaging, over time. Further, with allies, there is less concern about credibility, as there is a certain baseline level of trust, or at the very least the ability to clarify if there is a term that is new or if an important term is omitted. To be clear, allies do indeed clarify these things if their counterpart uses a term they do not understand, or even one they do not like – they may even reach out directly to request that a certain phraseology not be used again (US Interview 1). When allies are involved, officials sometimes even draft rhetoric together for bilateral statements – in those cases, there is open talk and coordination of language that is amenable to both sides. If one ally uses a term the other does not like, the relationship could be damaged; therefore, the overall goal, whether the rhetorical coordination is direct or not, is to avoid misunderstandings that could unnecessarily complicate the relationship, even if only temporarily (Korean Interview 2).

In contrast, with adversaries, small changes in wording may be even more significant, especially because the stakes tend to be higher for a misunderstanding between an adversary compared with an ally. But even if stakes are high with an ally, such as during some sort of

crisis that may require allied support, there are more opportunities to clarify, recalibrate, and rectify a mistake or negotiate a potential policy shift shown through words. In short, allied relationships are most often characterized by an established routine, a set of conventions that are built up over time. With allies, there are fewer major policy changes, but when a change does come it is taken seriously. For adversaries, each individual choice of words must be more strategic – there are more changes going on that need to be responded to, there are fewer routine interactions that can mitigate the importance of diplospeak, and there is more at stake for getting words “wrong.”

This is not to say that other factors that reveal state intentions are not important – troop movements, investments, and other more “costly” signaling mechanisms are also at play here. However, on a day-to-day basis, in between those larger shifts, diplomats can and do pay attention to changes in an adversary’s rhetoric as an indication that more analysis is needed. In my interviews, we discussed concerns about credibility. However, these diplomats acknowledged that while lying and bluffing are a problem, this concern does not negate the importance of analyzing an adversary’s rhetoric closely. As one interviewee said bluntly, “I think what countries choose to say publicly is indicative of something. Even if it’s a lie, it tells you something – what they choose to lie about and how they choose to lie” (US Interview 4). Similarly, when asked about rhetoric from adversaries like North Korea, a South Korean interviewee immediately called their words frivolous. However, he continued, that does not mean we should not carefully listen to them (Korean Interview 9).

3.3.2 Summary

Through this discussion, I have shown that diplomats rely on conventions of diplospeak both when drafting their own language and when analyzing the language of others. Diplomats know that rhetorical changes may communicate something to their counterparts, whether it is a modification of an underlying policy, a softening of a position, or an indicator of shifting

priorities. They are therefore careful to draft their statements to properly affirm the status quo unless a change is, indeed, intended. On the receiving side, diplomats pick up on changes to the diplospeak status quo and use them as a sign to look for meaning in the shift.

Next, I show how this drafting and clearance process plays out, codifying patterns of diplospeak over time. I do this through a quantitative text analysis of a large, novel corpus of State Department archival documents showing both original drafted language as well as bureaucratic clearance behavior. By the end of this next section, I will make it clear, just as my interviewees explained, that while all of a state's official statements are important, some are more important than others. When a high-stakes issue is in play or when an adversary is involved, diplomats pay *even more* attention to the exact wording of official statements. This tracks with my theory of diplospeak, which predicts that routinized and well-understood conventions will continue without much fanfare, while volatile issues with constantly changing language should require more diplomatic attention and analysis.

3.4 Large-N Analysis of Diplospeak

If I am correct that diplospeak conventions are codified through repeated use and that changes in diplospeak are associated with changing policy, then we should be able to see this theory reflected in patterns of real diplomatic behavior. To supplement the qualitative assessment above based on interviews with diplomats who actually took part in this process, I will now zoom out to show these patterns on a larger scale and over a longer period of time. The key elements to keep in mind here are that the more routinized and unchanging a policy or relationship is, the less attention diplomats will pay to the specific wording of a statement on that topic; in the absence of changes, the main goal will be to ensure the rhetorical status quo. When, however, the topic is highly important and variable, or the costs of miscommunication are high (i.e. when speaking about an adversary), I hypothesize that the number of diplomats assigned to sign off on ("clear") the document will go up. Using a novel

dataset consisting of press guidances prepared for every State Department Press Briefing conducted throughout the year 2007 and 2008, I show that both of these hypotheses hold. Below, I describe this novel dataset, which was directly collected from State Department archival material housed at the National Archives in Maryland. I then describe my data cleaning process, my approach to topic modeling and regression analysis, and conclude by discussing my results and implications for my theory of diplospeak conventions.

3.4.1 Data and Methodology

My corpus consists of press guidance packets prepared for all 472 State Department daily press briefings held from January 3, 2007 through December 31, 2008. Each of these packets contains a series of individual press guidance documents related to various topics of importance for that particular day. For example, the first press package in my corpus, prepared for the briefing on January 3, 2007, included various documents drafted and cleared by department bureaucracy – statements from the Bureau of African Affairs about instability in Somalia, from the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs about a missing plane in Indonesia, and from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs about Saddam Hussein’s execution, to give a few examples. Importantly, in addition to the text of the guidance itself, each document also contains a clearance page listing which individual bureaucrats within the State Department read, edited, and signed off on (“cleared”) the wording of a given statement. Using the text of each guidance, paired with its respective clearance page, I can therefore systematically trace whether and how officials treat their words differently depending on the subject of a given document.

In order to examine variation in clearance behavior, I first split each day’s guidance package by topic. This resulted in a total of 6,943 observations, each consisting of main guidance text, a clearance page, and, sometimes, additional background information intended

to give further context to the spokesperson.² To build my dependent variable – the amount of attention paid to the wording of an official statement as proxied by bureaucratic clearance behavior, I needed to determine the number of officials who cleared any given guidance document. To do this, I used a combination of optical character recognition (OCR) and hand coding. OCR provided a baseline number of clearances based on the number of individual bureaucrats who signed off on the clearance page with marks such as “ok,” “clear,” or “yes.” Each of those OCR-detected clearances were assigned a score of 1. In addition, any officials who marked themselves as “info,” meaning they were made aware of the content of the guidance but did not provide substantive comments or edits, received a score of 0.5.

However, because of the nature of these documents, slight variances in clearance page behavior and structure necessitated a direct visual check of all documents to supplement the automated OCR process. For example, in many cases, a clearance page might include a line such as: “JSmith/DJames: OK.” The OCR software would see the word “OK,” assume this represents one clearance, and assign it a score of 1. In reality, however, this line likely represents two separate individuals who cleared the document. Additionally, in rare cases, an official added a handwritten mark of “ok” onto the printed clearance page. These handwritten notes are rarely recognizable to OCR software. Direct inspection therefore allowed me to confirm and supplement the baseline work of the OCR process, adding confidence to the final dataset used for this analysis.

Next, I turned to my independent variable – the topic of a statement. To reiterate my core claim, I argue that some state rhetoric is more important than others, and therefore will necessitate increased bureaucratic attention to avoid sending the “wrong” message to other diplomats abroad. In order to show that variation in clearance behavior is tied to the topic at hand, I first must determine what topic is being addressed by a given document in my

2. Text marked as “Background” or with similar labels like “For Spokesman’s Eyes Only” were eventually removed from my text analysis. This is because this part of the guidance text was not prepared with public consumption in mind, and is therefore not the main focus of my theory and analysis.

dataset.

To create a coding scheme, I used a directed content analysis approach, in which “initial coding starts with a theory or relevant research findings,” but still relies on letting themes inductively emerge from the data itself (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009, 2). I did this by first reading through a sample of documents and then refining my categories through iterated sampling.³ Once I was satisfied that I had a coding scheme that was both comprehensive (every observation could be matched with a code) and mutually exclusive (every observation matched well with only one code), I hand-coded the entire corpus of 6,943⁴ documents. This hand-coding procedure was then validated through an intercoder reliability check.⁵ Summary statistics for the 15 final topic categories is shown in Table 1 below.⁶

Finally, I added two covariates to confirm that it is, indeed, the topic of an article that is primarily driving clearance behavior. Indeed, there are potential alternative explanations that rely on the nature of the clearance process itself, rather than the topic addressed per se, to explain variation in clearance behavior. As discussed above, officials send drafted guidance around to other parts of the bureaucracy based on which offices and desks might have equity in that document. Therefore, documents that mention a large number of countries might end up being cleared by all (or many) officials who are responsible for each of those countries, resulting in a higher clearance count. Similarly, one might expect that longer guidance documents might naturally touch on a larger number of subtopics, therefore increasing the final clearance number. To test each of these alternative explanations, I created two covariates:

3. See the Appendix at the end of this chapter for a copy of the final codebook.

4. While a supervised learning model could have been appropriate for this task, the number of categories (15) as well as the (relatively) small number of observations in my dataset and the potential for extensive diplomatic nuance in the texts themselves made a direct hand-coding scheme more accurate, albeit less time efficient.

5. Cohen’s Kappa = 0.859 based on a second coder evaluating a random sample of 500 observations.

6. Given the presence of some extreme outliers for both clearance and for the covariates mentioned below, this final dataset capped outliers at 1.5 times the interquartile range. Outlier diagnostics as well as results without capping observations are included for robustness in the appendix.

Table 3.2: Summary Statistics by Topic

	Topic	N	Mean	Median	SD
1	Events/Readouts	647	5.91	6.00	2.95
2	Aid/Disaster Relief	126	6.24	6.00	3.56
3	Consular (Logistics)	217	6.38	6.00	3.34
4	Human Rights (Positive)	166	6.45	6.50	2.66
5	Consular (Safety)	471	8.27	8.00	2.87
6	IOs/Intl Law	205	8.30	8.00	3.55
7	Peacekeeping	869	8.32	8.00	2.66
8	Trade/Environment/Misc	660	8.34	8.00	3.48
9	Terrorism	383	8.40	8.00	3.23
10	Human Rights (Negative)	1258	8.50	8.00	2.74
11	Russia	231	8.73	8.00	3.29
12	Security Misc	399	8.76	8.50	3.48
13	Iraq/Afghanistan	490	8.91	9.00	3.23
14	China	219	9.24	9.00	2.62
15	Nuclear Proliferation	603	9.99	10.00	3.00

country count (the number of individual countries mentioned in a document) and word count (the number of words in a given document).⁷

Finally, I further examine patterns of clearance behavior based on the type of bilateral relationship that the United States has with different countries mentioned in a given text. For example, based on my theory of conventional communication, one might expect that officials will treat guidance differently when it involves an ally than when it involves an adversary, or when it involves a country with no particular strategic importance to the United States at all. If all diplomatic rhetoric is equally important, it should not matter who is involved in the rhetoric; clearance behavior may vary only based on the topic at hand, not based on the potential diplomatic audience of the text itself. To see if this is the case, I construct three dummy variables representing the type of bilateral relationship a country has with

7. Guidance documents sometimes refer to countries by their full name and sometimes using demonyms, i.e. “Belgium,” “the Belgian government,” or even “the Belgians.” All of these would be counted once and only once per document as a mention of the country Belgium.

the United States – *ally*,⁸ *adversary*,⁹ and *great power*.¹⁰ These dummies are not mutually exclusive, meaning that if a document mentions both an ally and an adversary, i.e. North and South Korea, both the *ally* and *adversary* variable will be coded as 1.

As I will discuss in the result section below, it is clear that *country count* and *word count* both have a small, positive effect on clearance behavior (meaning, more countries mentioned and longer documents are in fact associated with more clearances). However, the topic of a document or *type* of country mentioned has far greater explanatory value. This confirms my assertion that while diplomats do take all their words seriously, they systematically take some more seriously than others.

3.4.2 Results and Discussion

To show that clearance behavior systematically varies not just because of institutional or bureaucratic practices but because of patterned diplomatic choices, I show how clearance numbers change based on two metrics – overall topic and type of state-to-state relationship at stake. Below, Figure 1 shows how the average number of clearances varies for each of my 15 topic codes, and Table 1 shows regression results for topic categories alone (Model 1) and including *Country Count* and *Word Count* covariates (Model 2). As these results make clear, some topics – mostly administrative and consular issues with little diplomatic or strategic significance – are paid significantly less clearance attention than more controversial or strategically important issues.

8. Coded as 1 if the document explicitly mentions any country that is a treaty ally with the United States – Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Tunisia, Pakistan, Qatar, Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines, New Zealand, Australia, Egypt, Israel, Japan, South Korea/Republic of Korea, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco, Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic/Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Netherlands, Macedonia/North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom.

9. Coded as 1 if the document explicitly mentions an adversary of the United States, chosen based on the Bush Administration’s original “Axis of Evil” (Iran, Iraq, and North Korea), as well as then-Undersecretary of State John Bolton’s “Beyond the Axis of Evil,” which added Cuba, Libya, and Syria.

10. Coded as 1 if the document explicitly mentions China or Russia.

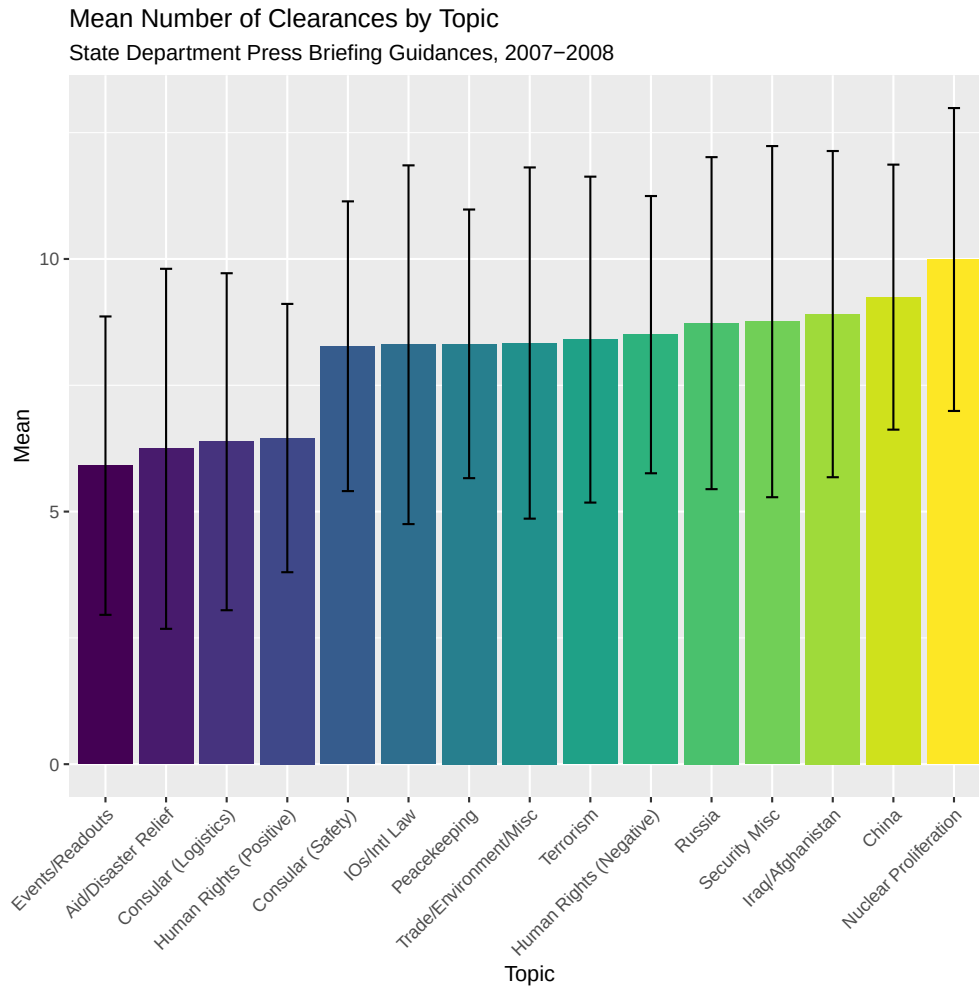
These results clearly show that clearance behavior is more than just random, and does vary based on the topic of a given document, even when controlling for the number of countries mentioned or length of the text. The topics with increased strategic and diplomatic importance, such as safety of American citizens abroad, terrorist incidents, and human rights concerns, receive more attention than purely logistical or positive topics (i.e. distribution of non-conflict-related humanitarian aid and disaster relief). Finally, military and security issues receive the highest level of clearance on average, with discussion of nuclear weapons and nonproliferation (especially related to Iran and North Korea) coming in on top. This fits squarely with my theory that more routinized topics with more room for rhetorical “error” will have little need for double-checking to ensure that the statements stick to the proper conventions of diplospeak. There is a certain format that meeting readouts tend to follow, and there is rarely need to worry about how a meeting between the Secretary of State and the Foreign Minister of a small country is described. This is not the case, however, when the topic of a meeting relates to an issue of greater strategic importance, such as a meeting with representatives of the P5+1 to discuss Iranian provocations. In that case, not only are diplospeak conventions less stable due to the constantly shifting strategic landscape of the issue at hand, the consequences of deviating from expectations and causing a misunderstanding are likely much higher under this scenario. This pattern of clearance behavior, therefore, clearly conforms to my expectations that more established and uncontroversial conventions of diplospeak require less bureaucratic maintenance.

Further, it is clear that these patterns are not merely conforming to bureaucratic incentives based on meta characteristics of the documents. The process of clearing press guidance means that when a given document touches on different issues or countries, officials with expertise on those topics may be added to the clearance list. Therefore, we can proxy the number of bureaucratic equities potentially involved in a given document through the number of different countries mentioned and the longer the text itself. However, as the regression

Table 3.3: Number of Clearances by Topic

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	no_outlier	
	Model 1 (1)	Model 2 (2)
China	3.002*** (0.340)	3.410*** (0.332)
Consular (Logistics)	0.140 (0.341)	0.540 (0.333)
Consular (Safety)	2.031*** (0.305)	2.486*** (0.298)
Events/Readouts	-0.333 (0.296)	0.457 (0.291)
Human Rights (Negative)	2.260*** (0.284)	2.659*** (0.277)
Human Rights (Positive)	0.213 (0.359)	0.636* (0.350)
IOs/Intl Law	2.060*** (0.344)	2.330*** (0.335)
Iraq/Afghanistan	2.666*** (0.304)	2.948*** (0.296)
Nuclear Proliferation	3.747*** (0.298)	4.129*** (0.291)
Peacekeeping	2.078*** (0.290)	2.447*** (0.284)
Russia	2.487*** (0.337)	2.766*** (0.329)
Security Misc	2.517*** (0.311)	2.800*** (0.303)
Terrorism	2.161*** (0.312)	2.474*** (0.304)
Trade/Environment/Misc	2.094*** (0.296)	2.486*** (0.288)
Country Count		0.118*** (0.030)
Word Count		0.004*** (0.0003)
Constant	6.242*** (0.271)	4.567*** (0.279)
Observations	6,944	6,944
R ²	0.109	0.156
Adjusted R ²	0.107	0.154
Residual Std. Error	3.040 (df = 6929)	2.960 (df = 6927)
F Statistic	60.688*** (df = 14; 6929)	80.149*** (df = 16; 6927)
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 3.1: Mean Number of Clearances by Topic

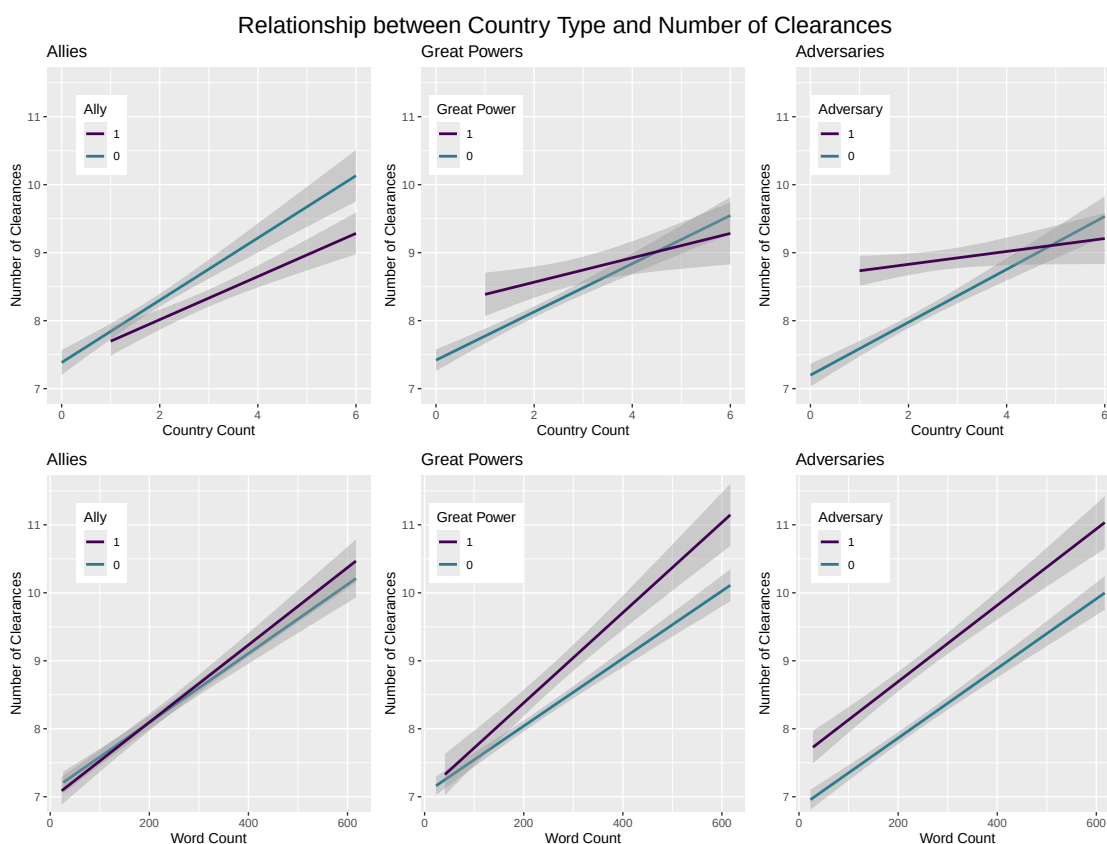


results in Model 2 show, the main topic of a document is still a significant driver of clearance behavior even after controlling for *Country Count* and *Word Count*.

To break down the drivers of clearance behavior even further, I next examine the results not just on overall topic, but through the lens of diplomatic relationships themselves. Given my theory that the goal of diplospeak conventions is to create meaningful communication between states, it is important to look at how these types of diplomatic relationships may impact the way officials draft and clear guidances. With this in mind, I broke down clearance behavior not by the overall topic in a given document, but rather what relationship the United States has to the particular countries mentioned in the text. Two documents with a similar

overall focus on terrorism, for example, might still be treated differently when it involves a close treaty ally than a country with no formal security relationship to the United States, for example. Figure 2 shows how the inclusion of one of these categories of countries impacts clearance numbers, even when once again controlling for *Country Count* (top row) and *Word Count* (bottom row).

Figure 3.2: Relationship between Country Type and Number of Clearances



Rather than expecting that any specific country will have a significant impact on clearance patterns on its own, it is the type of relationship that a country has with the United States that I hypothesize will drive clearance patterns. In short, I would expect strategically important countries will get more attention within the State Department bureaucracy. This expectation did hold for both adversaries and great powers. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the inclusion of an ally within a document actually results in a *lower* baseline number of

Table 3.4: Impact of Different Country Types on Clearance Count

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Country Type Mentioned in Text		
	Ally	Great Power	Adversary
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Ally	-0.192** (0.085)		
Great Power		0.306*** (0.108)	
Adversary			0.782*** (0.085)
Country Count	0.201*** (0.033)	0.151*** (0.031)	0.113*** (0.031)
Word Count	0.005*** (0.0003)	0.005*** (0.0003)	0.005*** (0.0003)
Constant	6.775*** (0.084)	6.755*** (0.084)	6.646*** (0.084)
Observations	6,944	6,944	6,944
R ²	0.063	0.064	0.074
Adjusted R ²	0.063	0.063	0.074
Residual Std. Error (df = 6940)	3.115	3.115	3.097
F Statistic (df = 3; 6940)	156.431***	157.497***	185.027***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

clearances than documents that do not mention an ally. This pattern holds true no matter how many countries are mentioned in a given document, although the inclusion of an ally does not seem to significantly impact clearances when controlling for word count. Nevertheless, at no point is a mention of an ally a factor that increases the number of clearances that a document is assigned. In a way this is counterintuitive, given the fact the allies are, presumably, strategically important to the United States and therefore guidances that relate to them should be treated with additional care. However, this could be an indicator that strategic importance alone is not enough to explain higher clearance numbers. Instead, it appears that clearance numbers are driven downward by increased interaction; the United States is presumably in closer and more casual contact with its allies than with other countries, and therefore may have already established standardized, non-controversial guidance language that is used continuously without the need for high levels of clearance on any given document. In either case, this, combined with evidence from my interviews, lends credence to my theory that more routinized integrations with well-established conventions of diplomacy and fewer moments of drastic policy change would be reflected in a lower investment of bureaucratic energy in the form of clearance behavior.

My theory also fits well with the results for great powers and adversaries. Given the importance that states place on potential rivals in the international system, mentions of Russia or China should cause the State Department to be particularly careful in the wording of its statements; indeed, the results in both Figure 2 and Table 3 show an increase in clearances associated with the mention of either of these countries. Interestingly, though, the size of the increase is less than half that of discussions involving an adversary. This once again squares with the idea that while these guidances are handled with additional care because of their strategic importance, the existence of more established, routinized interactions that the United States shares with China and Russia limits the need for quite as much careful scrutiny. Looking at more recent guidance documents, in which discussions of Russia by the

US Government are taking place within a significantly more conflictual context, could be helpful in shedding additional light on these results.¹¹

Indeed, adversaries are the group that seems to really affect the number of clearances assigned to a document. Even after controlling for the total number of countries mentioned and total word count, documents that mentioned an adversary of the United States had significantly more clearances than documents that did not. This again makes sense with a theory of state rhetoric in which the lack of solidified, consistent rhetorical patterns increases the number of clearances assigned to a document, while the establishment of standardized diplospeak conventions decreases it. In the case of US adversaries like North Korea, Cuba, and Iran, there is both a high level of active conflict and a low level of routinized rhetorical interactions.

There are two key takeaways from this analysis. First, State Department clearance behavior does seem to vary based on the topic at hand or the type of bilateral relationship being discussed. In other words, while diplomats do take all their words seriously, it is clear that they do, indeed, take some words more seriously than others. Specifically, security related topics (i.e., the War in Iraq or nuclear proliferation), are more likely to receive increased bureaucratic attention in the form of higher numbers of clearances. In addition, the type of country mentioned in a document does drive clearance behavior as well, sometimes in surprising ways.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I used both qualitative and quantitative evidence to show that states can send meaningful messages to one another through deliberate use of diplospeak. In interviews with diplomats who were themselves charged with sending and receiving these messages, it

11. I submitted FOIA requests to the State Department in January 2023 for additional guidance documents covering a broader span of years, but as of publication I am still awaiting a response.

was clear that they relied on the vocabulary of diplospeak to keep tabs on specific policy issues; continued use of the same phrases indicates status quo, while even minor changes in wording were immediately noticeable to these diplomats as potential signals of a shift in policy. Building on these insights, I then broadened my analysis to see if I could find traces of these individual choices in patterns of diplomatic rhetoric across topics and over time. In my quantitative analysis of two years of drafted rhetoric from the State Department, there were indeed clear patterns that emerged showing that diplomats take some of their statements more seriously than others. Specifically, more strategically important issues, as well as more volatile and variable relationships, systematically garnered increased bureaucratic attention to ensure that every word in a document was “right” before being released publicly.

These findings are particularly important because they could complicate the current understanding of signaling between adversaries. The literature has extensively examined signaling during active crises, and have shown that highly visible, highly costly kinetic actions trump both public and private rhetorical messaging in those moments (Katagiri and Min 2019). However, my results indicate that adversarial states still care deeply about their rhetorical messaging, even outside of those direct crisis bargaining scenarios. Indeed, my results indicate that when the United States is discussing one of its adversaries, it is actually far more careful about the wording of its statements than when any other type of country is mentioned. Far from mere cheap talk, the State Department seems to invest quite a bit of its bureaucratic energy into getting its statements “right,” especially when that statement involves an adversary.

At the same time, documents involving US allies get significantly less bureaucratic scrutiny, perhaps indicating more routinized language, less controversial topics, and/or more baseline trust that does not require such detailed concern about every single word that goes into a statement. This suggests that it is not necessarily the topic, or at least not the topic alone, that drives clearance behavior. Instead, it provides evidence for my theory that the

key reason that a bureaucracy might take extra care with the wording of a statement is to avoid sending the wrong message to those counterparts in question, especially knowing that shifts to the rhetorical status quo are likely to be picked up by diplomats abroad. The rest of this dissertation will continue to examine this phenomenon, with particular interest in investigating the intentionality behind these variations as well as the reception of diplospeak conventions by other states.

3.6 References

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3.7 Appendix

Figure 3.3: Clearance Count with Outliers

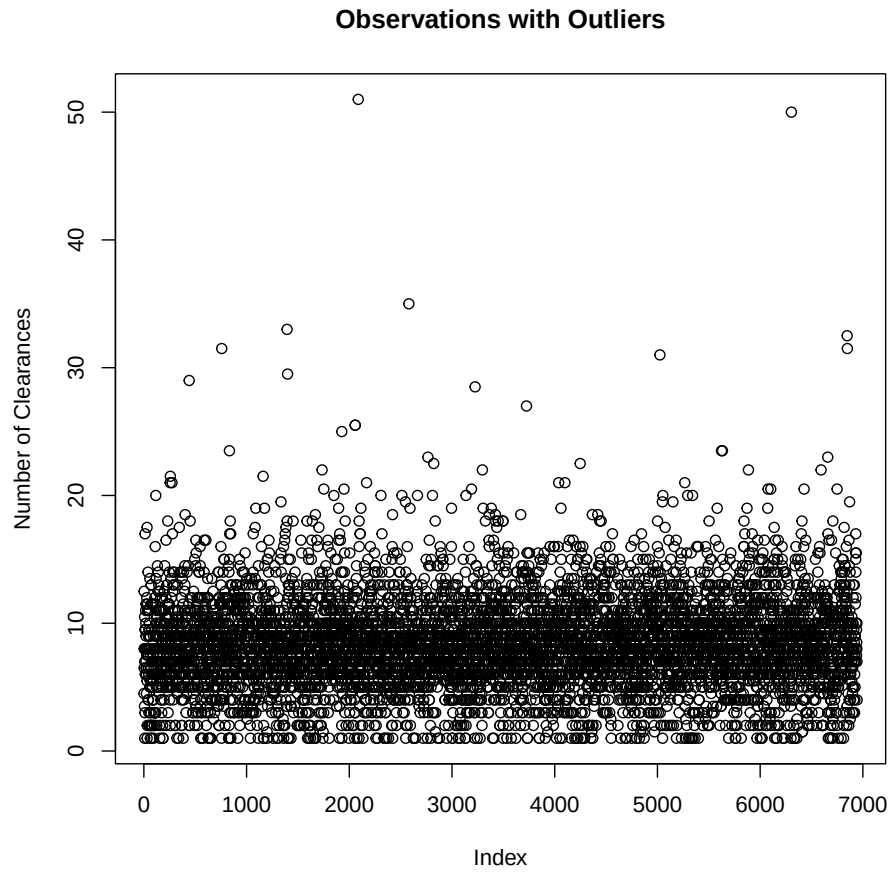


Figure 3.4: Country Count with Outliers

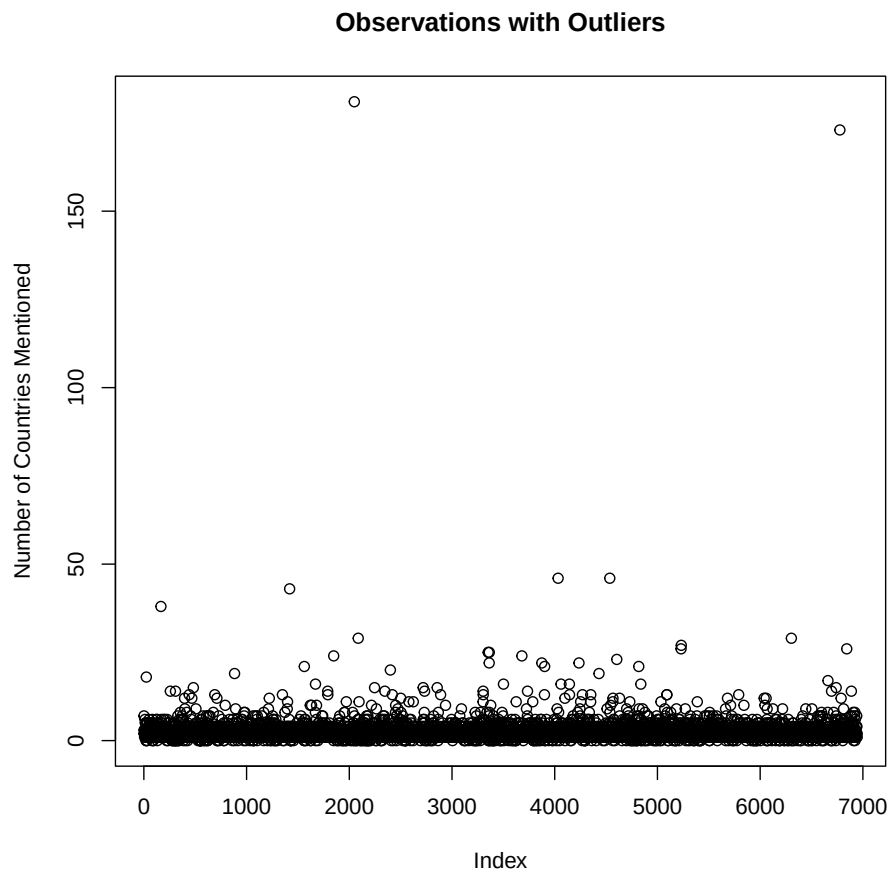


Figure 3.5: Word Count with Outliers

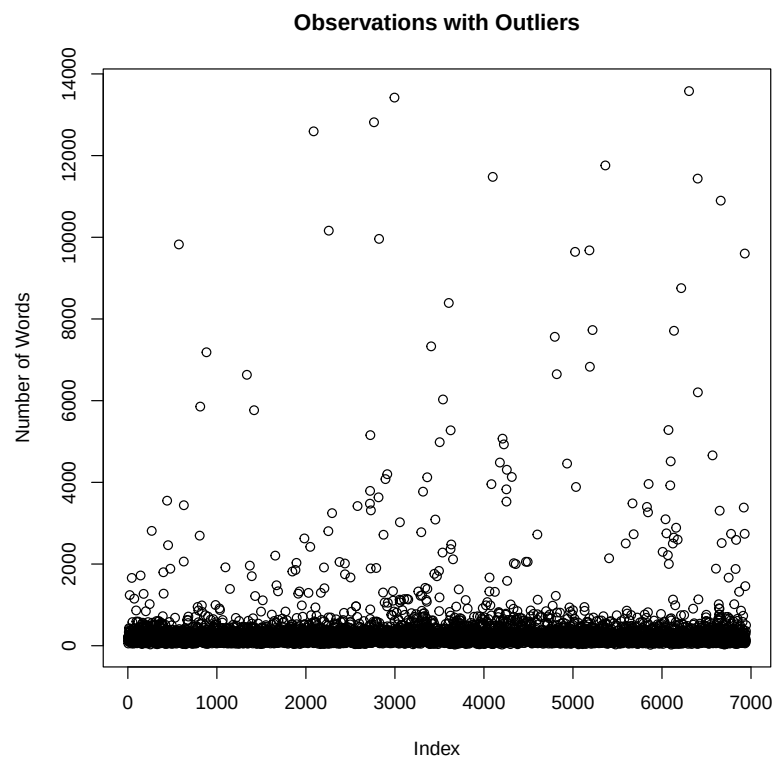


Figure 3.6: Clearance Count Outliers Removed

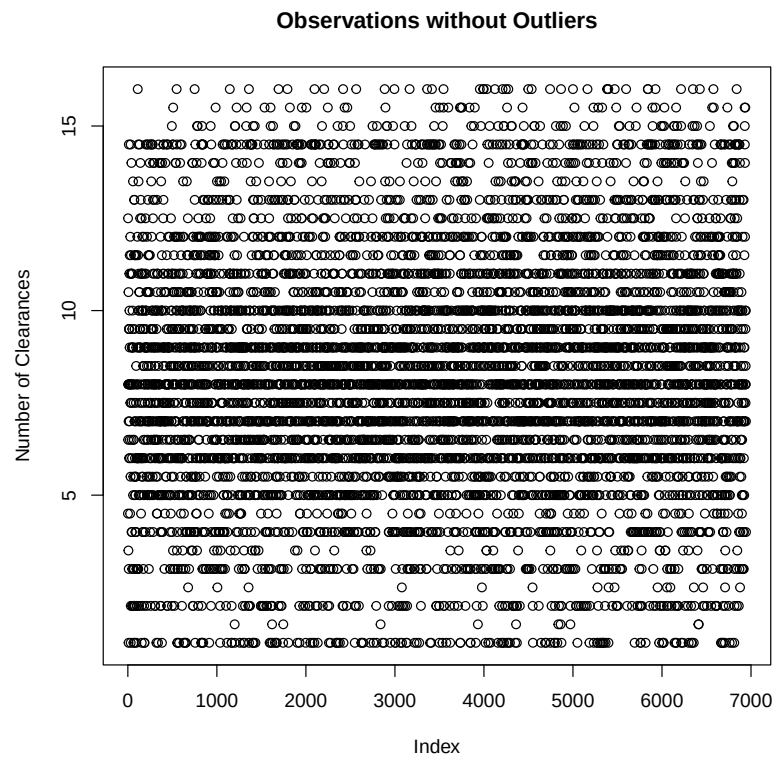


Figure 3.7: Country Count Outliers Removed

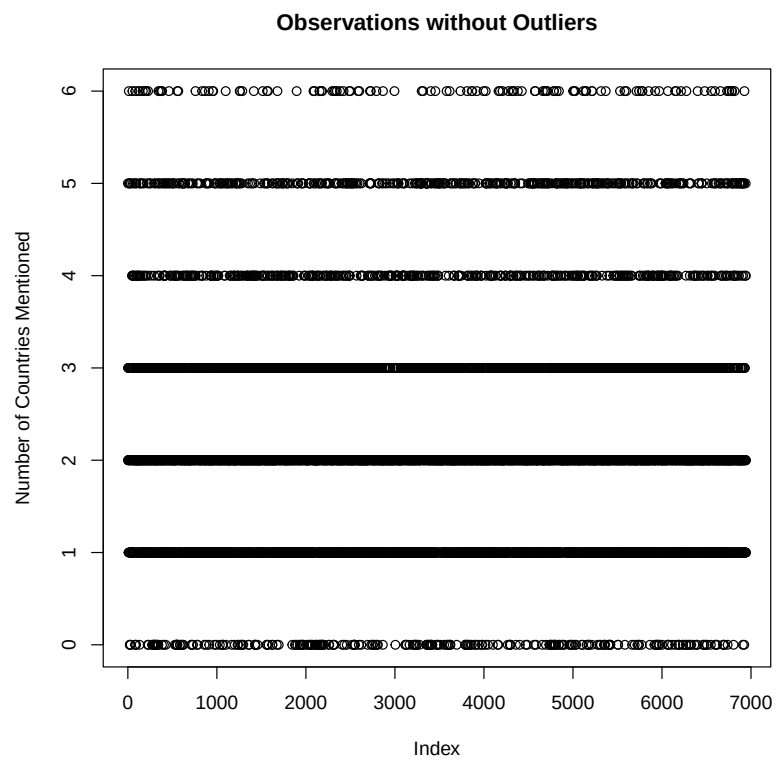


Figure 3.8: Word Count Outliers Removed

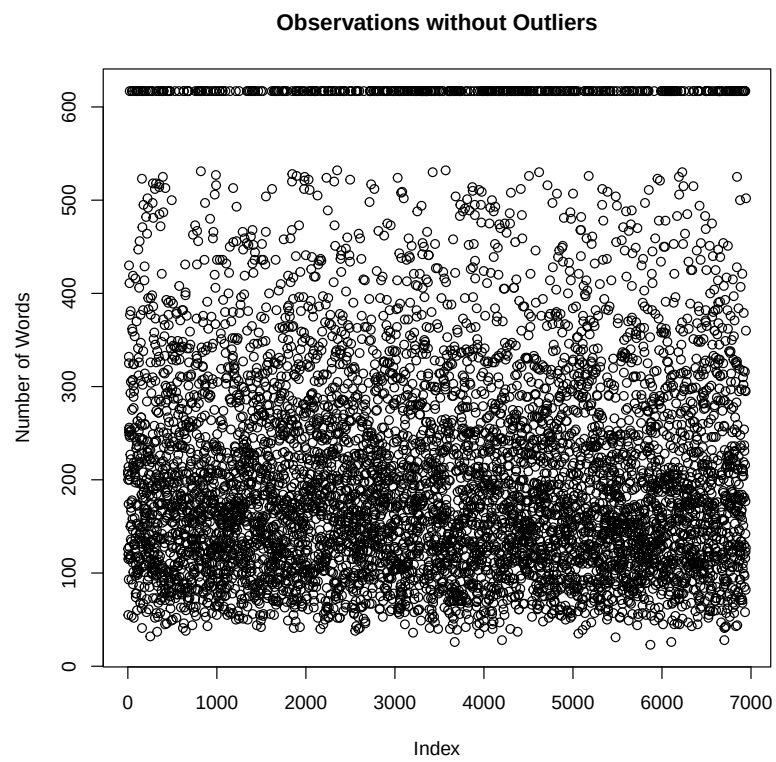


Table 3.1: Robustness Checks

	<i>Dependent variable: No. of Clearances by Topic</i>	
	With Outliers (1)	With Outliers and Logged (2)
China	2.808*** (0.374)	0.572*** (0.055)
Consular (Logistics)	−0.231 (0.374)	0.083 (0.055)
Consular (Safety)	1.899*** (0.336)	0.445*** (0.049)
Events/Readouts	−0.373 (0.326)	0.064 (0.048)
Human Rights (Negative)	2.115*** (0.313)	0.478*** (0.046)
Human Rights (Positive)	0.065 (0.395)	0.153*** (0.058)
IOs/Intl Law	1.854*** (0.378)	0.364*** (0.056)
Iraq/Afghanistan	2.553*** (0.334)	0.488*** (0.049)
Nuclear Proliferation	3.775*** (0.328)	0.643*** (0.048)
Peacekeeping	1.939*** (0.319)	0.436*** (0.047)
Russia	2.160*** (0.370)	0.450*** (0.054)
Security Misc	2.693*** (0.342)	0.469*** (0.050)
Terrorism	1.975*** (0.343)	0.417*** (0.050)
Trade/Environment/Misc	2.074*** (0.325)	0.419*** (0.048)
Country Count	0.048*** (0.011)	
Word Count	0.001*** (0.0001)	
Country Count (Logged)		0.079*** (0.014)
Word Count (Logged)		0.088*** (0.009)
Constant	6.012*** (0.301)	1.055*** (0.064)
Observations	6,944	6,944
R ²	0.146	0.133
Adjusted R ²	0.144	0.131
Residual Std. Error (df = 6927)	3.340	0.490
F Statistic (df = 16; 6927)	73.955***	66.584***
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Code Book:

1 Russia arms control and/or conflicts

Any mention of missile defense in Europe, NATO expansion, arms control negotiations with Russia, territorial conflict in Georgia/South Ossetia

2 Civil and human rights (negative)

Mentions of concern over or responses to violations of political and civil rights, election monitoring, election violence, arrest of political opposition (i.e. in Burma and Zimbabwe)

3 Civil and human rights (positive) and public diplomacy/cultural exchanges

Congratulatory remarks on elections or new leadership, praising human rights defenders (not focused on specific ongoing incidents and/or active government suppression). Also cultural exchange programs if discussed positively.

4 Consular (logistics)

Discussions of passports, visas, public travel, State Department appointments, etc.

5 Consular (safety)

Safety warnings for citizen travel, evacuations, incidents of violence against civilians or personnel, usually isolated and not related to other topics like Iraq/Afghanistan, DPRK, etc.

6 War on Terror/terrorism incidents

Discussions of coalition in War on Terror not in Iraq/Afghanistan, violent incidents that specifically mention terrorism or terroristic threats, sanctions and other actions specifically mentioning terrorism. Also include mentions of Guantanamo Bay detainees.

7 Misc violent incidents and security concerns (not terrorism)

Usually department being asked to offer a response to a specific incident. DO NOT include incidents specifically labeled as terrorism or state election interference (those should be 6 and 2 respectively). Could be general security concerns not related to other topics, i.e. piracy, troops, counternarcotics, etc. Foreign aid primarily about security or military assistance should be here, not 13, and things related to other key topics (i.e. poppy cultivation in Afghanistan) should be in those location-specific topics.

8 China human rights concerns, South China Sea, and/or HK/Taiwan/Tibet

Not general readouts, but specific discussion of issues like territory (i.e. One China policy), or human rights including as they related to 2008 Beijing Olympics. Do not include general human and civil rights discussions that tangentially relate to China (should be 2). Discussion of Taiwan included here as it relates to One China policy/disputes, but also arms sales and security guarantees for Taiwan.

9 Wars in Iraq/Afghanistan

Anything mentioning the coalition, troops, DOD, security contractors, etc. If it discusses Iraqi elections or civilian security concerns but does not mention the war/troops/etc, can be coded as 2 or 5 respectively.

10 Nuclear issues and nonproliferation negotiations

Anything explicitly mentioning proliferation, nukes or P5 + 1/Six Party Talks, conflict on the Korean peninsula, troops, etc. Human rights or travel/logistics, i.e. for negotiator Chris Hill, that does not mention those issues explicitly should be coded 1 or 12 respectively. If it is about political violence or civil rights, code 2.

11 Peacekeeping/conflict resolution

Conflicts other than South Ossetia/Iraq/Afghanistan, especially if it mentions peacekeeping, peace process, negotiations, etc. Usually Sudan/Darfur, Israel/Palestine,

but also could include ongoing conflicts in places like Sri Lanka. Must be about more than an isolated violent incident or instance of terrorism. Could also include territorial disputes that do not fit well elsewhere.

12 Events/readouts

Previews of upcoming meetings or travel, or readouts of meetings. Consider if the text is primarily reporting the summary of a meeting or whether it is meaningfully engaging with one of the other topics. Should be coded as 12 if it is primarily a readout, even if one of the other issues is tangentially mentioned (and vice versa if travel is mentioned but the text is meaningfully about one of the other issues).

13 Humanitarian aid/refugees

Anything related to providing aid abroad, including for humanitarian crises, natural disasters, or development aid. Also anything logistically related to refugee resettlement in the US or providing support for refugees elsewhere. If it is related to specific incidents or broader peacekeeping needs, should be coded as 7 or 11. If related to Iraq/Afghanistan coalition staff resettlement or refugees specifically related to those wars, should be coded as 9. Discussion about human rights abuses/violence toward refugees or commentary on refugee rights rather than logistics should be coded as 2.

14 International Organizations and/or International Law

Anything focused on the UN, IJC, etc. not including issues specifically mentioned elsewhere (ie sanctions against the DPRK for proliferation). For example, if text is focused on the Human Rights Council (i.e. new leadership) as opposed to a specific human rights incident, it should be coded 14.

15 Misc economic, trade, or other non-security issues

Anything economic, free trade negotiations, reporting of trade numbers, environmental

issues other than natural disasters (i.e. general climate discussions), cross-border issues not conflict related (ie water issues between US and Canada). NOT minor trade mentions within readouts (should be 12). May also include individual cases or domestic issues that do not fit well elsewhere.

CHAPTER 4

DIPLOSPEAK THAT DEFINES A RELATIONSHIP

4.1 Introduction

"The American people believe in human rights and oppose tyranny in whatever form, whether of the left or the right." This phrase, representing a major shift in President Reagan's approach to authoritarian regimes around the world, appeared in a New York Times article on March 13, 1986. When the article appeared in the archives of the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this phrase was underlined — along with any other phrases discussing the potential implications of this policy shift for U.S. partners abroad. One sentence was both underlined and marked with a check, indicating its particular importance to the Korean diplomats tasked with analyzing the document: "The statement does not mention authoritarian regimes friendly to Washington, such as those in South Korea, Indonesia and Taiwan, and the officials declined to say how the new approach would apply in those case."

This simple example shows that not only did the Koreans — under a right wing authoritarian at the time — pay very close attention to how President Reagan talked about their foreign policy, they were particularly focused on key words and phrases that might give rhetorical clues about how his administration would approach their policy toward the Korean Peninsula.

In this chapter, I will show how diplospeak facilitates the maintenance of a friendly bilateral relationship — specifically, the relationship between the United States and its long-time ally, South Korea, during the Reagan Administration. Using declassified archival documents from both the U.S. State Department and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as memoirs and oral histories of diplomats directly involved in the relationship, I lay out a story of how both sides send and receive messages through deliberate rhetorical practices. Specifically, I show in this chapter that processes of coordination and contestation drive communication

via diplospeak within this close allied relationship.

The U.S.-South Korean bilateral relationship has weathered periods of relative calm and relative turbulence over the period of seven decades since the two countries officially established diplomatic relations in 1949. However, unlike with adversaries, the close diplomatic and military relationship allows – or even requires – deliberate coordination on policy issues. At the same time, it creates opportunities for direct coordination on how both sides speak about those policy issues as well. This is not limited to allies, of course – in the more rare instances where two adversaries agree to a summit, for example, there is extensive coordination on how to announce the meeting, whether and how to hold a press appearance or release a joint statement, etc. However, with close partners, coordination and communication both in public and behind the scenes is ongoing.

This does not mean that diplomatic rhetoric between allies is static, or that coordination between allies is frictionless. The U.S.-Korea alliance has weathered significant storms as it heads toward its eighth decade, and those periods of relative strain made communication simultaneously more essential and more difficult.

In this chapter, I focus primarily on a crucial period in the history of the U.S.-Korea relationship – the 1980s – in order to illustrate how both sides worked to communicate through their diplomatic rhetoric. Specifically, I show that this era was exemplified by processes of coordination but also contestation over language. Using contemporaneous archival documents as well as oral histories from diplomats involved in U.S.-Korea policy at the time, I show how the two sides communicated despite tensions in the relationship. This case study illustrates the importance of diplospeak in managing a bilateral relationship under crisis, showing that diplomats from both sides were highly attuned to the words they and their counterparts used, extrapolating intention from minor shifts in word choice.

First, I discuss how the transition from the Carter Administration to the Reagan Administration was characterized by deliberate attempts to create new expectations around

alliance policy using diplomatic rhetoric. The Reagan Administration began creating new conventions of diplomatic language based on active, consistent security reassurances as well as an approach to disagreements based on “quiet diplomacy” behind the scenes rather than airing issues in public. Next, I turn to the process of rhetorical coordination between the United States and South Korea through two presidential-level meetings in 1983 and 1985. I trace the extensive negotiations the State Department and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs engaged in over the exact wording of public statements summarizing those meetings, particularly as they related to American support for President Chun’s authoritarian regime. I therefore show how seriously both sides took their rhetoric, specifically how certain words and phrases could be used to indicate either continuity or change in American alliance policy. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the end of this so-called “quiet diplomacy” approach in 1987, when American rhetoric took a deliberate turn toward calling out Chun’s authoritarian tendencies; a change that Korean diplomats analyzed extensively and correctly took as indicative of changes in American policy. In short, this chapter shows how the production and reception of diplospeak plays out as a communicative mechanism within a close bilateral relationship.

4.2 Coordination and Contestation: US-Korea Relations under Reagan

4.2.1 *Reagan’s First Term: Reassurance, Reassurance, Reassurance*

President Ronald Reagan took office in 1981 during a period of tumult in international relations around the world, and Korea was no exception. Following a military coup, Chun Doo Hwan officially seized the presidency in 1980, and questions over how to deal with his authoritarian government colored U.S.-Korea diplomacy throughout Reagan’s administration.

At the time, the alliance was still reeling from President Jimmy Carter’s approach to

Korea policy. As a presidential candidate, Carter pledged to withdraw American troops from the Korean Peninsula, a promise that rocked alliance supporters on both sides of the Pacific. “As soon as the idea was broached in the campaign the South Koreans became almost catatonic, the alarm was palpable...as soon as Carter was elected President, then the concern became almost like a tidal wave on the part of the South Koreans,” recalled John Kelley, an American diplomat posted in Seoul starting in 1975, during an Oral History recorded in 1996. “From a political point of view, we didn’t care whether the unit was actually capable of fighting the war or not, what we were concerned about was the reassurance that it provided the South Koreans. The South Koreans would know as would the North Koreans, that this unit was not as capable as it had been. They would see any diminution as the equivalent of total abandonment. Any erosion would alarm them, and so we had to try to somehow reassure the South Koreans that any reduction was not going to signal abandonment” (Kelley 1996).

This left American diplomats with the difficult task of reassuring the South Koreans while remaining true to the policy as issued by candidate, then president, Carter. “We in the Embassy walked a fine line: we could not deny that candidate Carter had said that he would withdraw the troops, we could not deny that periodically some high level official in Washington said the same thing, but on the other hand, we were always quick to point out to our Korean counterparts that no order had been issued and that any withdrawals, of which there were some minor ones, would only occur over a long period of time, if ever,” said Thomas Stern, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul under Carter, in 1998. “We never received any guidance from the Department that we could use and therefore were left pretty much to our own devices. We could not say much publicly, and therefore were not able to conduct an effective public relations counter attack and were periodically attacked for being an ‘older brother’ who was about to abandon his ‘younger brother’ to the beasts of the North” (Stern 1993).

Only adding to paranoia was Carter's focus on human rights. Specifically, Carter's preference for openly "naming and shaming" friend and foe alike had the authoritarian regime in Seoul on edge. Seoul worried that openly airing out concerns over domestic issues in Korea could get in the way of the alliance, or at the very least leave adversaries in the region with the impression that the United States was less than resolved in its security pledges. These attacks read in Seoul as a portent of "American disengagement from the defense of the peninsula, which for them they felt was a life and death matter as they were still threatened by a dangerous, antagonistic, totalitarian regime in the north," said Ambassador Robert Rich Jr., who was Director of Korean Affairs in DC during the Carter Administration, in 1994 (Rich 1994).

In fact, it was not just Carter's rhetorical strategies themselves per se, but the manner in which they were carried out that created so much strain in the U.S.-Korea relationship. The lack of clarity over policy, the gap between campaign promises and conversations on the ground, and a sense that criticisms on human rights issues were not properly balanced with explicit security reassurances; all of these factors contributed to confusion and uncertainty about American security commitments in Seoul. "What struck me is that, if you look at South Korea and compare the attitudes of the Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations, in essence all of them had the same priorities. In the end the Carter administration wasn't going to threaten our security relationships with South Korea," said Ambassador Daniel A. O'Donahue, who served both at the US Embassy in Seoul (1972-1974) and as the Office Director of Korean Affairs (1974-1976). It was therefore not the policy itself that caused issues, he said, but rather that "the cost in terms of how the Carter administration handled human rights issues, you might say, very often involved an antagonistic or adversarial process. Within the government this involved a higher policy cost than we should have had" (O'Donohue 1995). The lack of regularity on diplomatic rhetoric, both in terms of consistent use of the same language over time and significant gaps between public statements,

private conversations, and actual actions, meant that diplospeak was not able to effectively communicate American intentions to the South Koreans during this volatile period.

Entering the White House in January 1981, the Reagan administration took a drastically different approach. Indeed, the shift from Carter era diplospeak to Reagan era diplospeak was stark, visibly showcasing the seismic shift in underlying policy. One of the Reagan administration's goals was rhetorical reassurance, especially when it came to American security commitments. In Reagan's first term, consistency in security rhetoric was a key component of vocally reinforcing the shift from the Carter to the Reagan era, cementing the idea that regardless of disagreements on rights or trade, the military alliance would not waver.

Even before Reagan was elected, he began establishing some of the key policy phrases that would drive his foreign policy, including toward South Korea. For example, Reagan's pledge to pursue "peace through strength" first appeared in his election rhetoric, including in the foreign policy platform put forward during the RNC in July 1980. Regarding Korea, the platform stated: "Republicans recognize the unique danger presented to our ally South Korea. We will encourage continued efforts to expand political participation and individual liberties within the country, but will recognize the special problems brought on by subversion and potential aggression from the North. We will maintain American ground and air forces in South Korea, and will not reduce our presence further. Our treaty commitments to South Korea will be restated in unequivocal terms and we will re-establish the process of close consultations between our governments" (From the GOP's 1980 party platform, as quoted by (Lee 2020)). According to Lee, MOFA examined this statement carefully, and assessed that Reagan would be more "sympathetic to Seoul's needs than Carter had been" (7).

On human rights, Reagan's rhetoric was also drastically different from Carter's. Reagan's approach to the Korean Peninsula was one of "quiet diplomacy," by which he meant his administration would handle all policy disagreements behind the scenes. The administration repeatedly pledged not to publicly shame or embarrass its allies, and instead pursue

results-oriented approaches to resolving conflicts behind the scenes (Lee 2020). According to contemporaneous documents, the Koreans appeared to appreciate this approach, encouraging Reagan officials to bring their concerns to the Korean side directly rather than airing out disagreements in public. In a memo from incoming Secretary of State Alexander Haig in January 1981, sent in the lead-up to President Reagan's first summit with Chun Doo Hwan, Haig told the president that his primary objectives should be "to restore normalcy to our relations with a valued ally; to underscore the constancy of the American commitment to peace and stability in Northeast Asia, to support recent ROK diplomatic initiatives on North-South issues; and to indicate understanding of ROK economic difficulties without incurring obligations we may be unable to meet." Haig further suggested a list of talking points for the President, encouraging him to "emphasize that your administration will refrain from public criticism of Korean internal affairs, but evidence of political moderation within Korea will help us sustain important popular support in the U.S for the alliance" (talking points prepared by the State Department from January 23, 1981, as quoted by (27).

This meant that private conversations became more important; because public criticisms were few and far between, any public statements against an ally that did appear was given increased weight. In fact, as diplomat Edward Kloth recalled in his Oral History in 2008, Reagan was later able to have more influence during the crucial moment of democratization in Korea in his second term because he used criticism judiciously: "In this case, having a very conservative U.S. administration, in fact meant that we had more influence than we would have with a liberal administration. President Chun had based his legitimacy, in part, on his 'special' relationship with President Reagan. If President Reagan's conservative administration was telling Chun to keep his word and step down and to have fair elections, that was very powerful" (Kloth 2008).

As Reagan embraced Chun as their first summit meeting in 1981, the rocky period of alliance management under Carter seemed to have smoothed over. At the lunch after Reagan

and Chun's first summit meeting in 1981, Reagan evoked the end of the Korean War, particularly the moment that General MacArthur turned over command of Seoul to Syngman Rhee, saying: "We share your commitment to freedom. If there is one message that I have for the Korean people today, it is this: Our special bond of freedom and friendship is as strong today as it was in that meeting 30 years ago" (Reagan 1981). Chun was reportedly deeply moved by this, and "responded that he would see a mature partnership with the United States and the era of dialogue and consensus for building a 'freer, more abundant, and democratic society.'" According to Lee, Chun appeared "gratified by Reagan's unmistakable Cold-War rhetoric" (Lee 2020, 33).

The 1981 summit meeting would not prove to be a model for subsequent meetings between Reagan and Chun, however, at least in terms of rhetorical coordination. As the 80s continued and American patience with the authoritarian regime in Seoul wore thin, diplomatic rhetoric, especially during highly publicized presidential-level meetings, became a source of intense contestation between the two allies.

4.2.2 Summitry: Coordination and Contestation in Action

As the two sides geared up for their second summit in 1983 – this time in Seoul – President Chun strongly requested that they plan to issue a joint statement in conjunction with the meeting in order to continue the theme of strong symbolic support for his government that the 1981 summit had begun. The American side reluctantly agreed, although they pointed out that Reagan would be making a speech at the National Assembly during his visit to Seoul, and therefore another public statement of American policy may be redundant. Nevertheless, they began preparing a draft statement. However, the initial result was not what the Koreans expected.

According to Lee, the South Koreans were "stunned to find a very troublesome article (Article 9) touching upon sensitive domestic political matters," despite zero references in the

Korean draft: “President Chun reviewed for President Reagan his plans for political liberalization and development. President Reagan expressed his support for efforts toward these goals, and his concurrence with President Chun’s view that a constitutional transfer of power in 1988 will strengthen the foundation for future stability and national consensus in Korea.” In Lee’s assessment, “‘liberalization and development’ meant the process of political democratization and implied emphasis on human rights. The South Koreans resisted what they regarded as the obvious US design to interfere in their domestic political affairs. Moreover, they resented a specific reference to ‘a constitutional transfer of power’ five years ahead of its schedule” (Lee 2020, 85–86).

The process of deliberation over the wording of the joint statement, specifically Article 9, continued even after Reagan arrived on the Peninsula, with the two sides agreeing on an acceptable version of the statement only at the very last minute. The negotiations, as described by Lee, focused not just on the specific words themselves per se, but on how the established expectations over use of certain words and phrases would “raise questions” about whether American policy toward Chun had changed. In other words, shifting diplospeak conventions dictated that the Americans should be consistent in their public statements about Chun throughout the trip to avoid confusion over policy. The Koreans, for their part, wanted to avoid establishing a new convention around criticism of Chun from the Americans, and therefore contested such rhetoric wherever possible. They particularly expressed concern over the American insistence on specifically mentioning the end of Chun’s term in 1988 because it would imply that the Americans did not already believe Chun’s prior statements on the issue. The Koreans even specifically referenced quiet diplomacy as a means to discourage the inclusion of overly critical discussion of Chun’s leadership (94).

After this back-and-forth, the eventual Article 9 that appeared in the joint statement was quite short and rhetorically neutered: “9. The two Presidents affirmed the importance of defending and strengthening freedom and the institutions that serve freedom, openness,

and political stability” (Reagan and Chun 1983). This rhetoric was new compared to the one following the summit in 1981, which did not mention domestic political issues at all. However, it would prove to be a stepping stone toward Reagan’s subsequent press statements after the Reagan-Chun meeting in 1985, in which the Americans proved to be far less willing to compromise on their rhetoric. In the end, the fact that Article 9 was included at all, particularly with explicit mentions of freedom and openness, was seen as a win for the U.S., while Chun was “at least partially satisfied that the United States recognized the importance of ‘political stability’ in South Korea” (Lee 2020, 94).

The 1983 summit meeting in Seoul showed that the Americans were not yet prepared to take a hardline stance toward Chun. However, cracks were beginning to show – cracks that would begin to widen in 1985 before fully breaking open in 1987.

4.2.3 Breaking Conventions: Evolving Rhetoric in 1985

In planning for President Chun’s visit to Washington in 1985, coordination and contestation over how, exactly, to discuss the domestic political situation in Korea began to ratchet up. Similar to the joint statement after Reagan’s trip to Seoul just two years prior, the two sides found themselves at odds over how to handle planned press remarks after the meeting.

This time, the two sides went back and forth over the language to be used by both Presidents in a post-summit press appearance for nearly a full month before the meeting. Some of the points involved typical discussion on wording, such as issues on alliance posture toward North Korea. Others needed little to no discussion at all, as in the case of a section on promoting cultural and educational ties. However, two points in particular sparked considerable negotiation over wording – characterization of trade issues, and support for Chun’s government.

In a document dated April 9, the Korean side provided a copy of President Chun’s drafted press remarks, as well as a list of suggestions for President Reagan to include in

his remarks. According to the document, these points were delivered to Assistant Secretary Wolfowitz on April 8. Further, the document requests that the State Department be apprised of “two points on which we place particular emphasis”: 1) the continued “firm US security commitment” and 2) “US support for the ROK’s continued efforts to achieve political and social development” (*Press Remarks* 1985). The first part did not seem to be a point of particular contention, and the final version of President Reagan’s remarks indeed began first with a statement reaffirming the security ties between the two countries and calling the relationship “a linchpin of peace in Northeast Asia” (Reagan 1985).

The second point, however, was far more controversial. Similar to the joint statement issued in 1983, the Chun government desperately wanted public affirmation from Reagan not just for his leadership in general, but specifically for his “resolute determination to protect the constitution” (*Press Remarks* 1985; Lee 2020). The American side returned a draft with a very different tone and content. Instead of praising Chun for his handling of the ongoing domestic political crisis, the first American draft emphasized Chun’s movement toward “a more open and stable polity, which will prepare him to achieve a peaceful transfer of power as promised at the end of his term in 1988.” Even worse, in the U.S. proposal, Reagan would express “our continuing support for such steps that will help Korea achieve political development that corresponds to its remarkable economic growth” – a not-so-subtle reference to U.S. trade demands (레이건 대통령의 신문발표문 교섭내용 1985). Far from a vocal endorsement, the draft appeared more geared toward publicly holding Chun to the promises he had made to leave office in 1988 – promises that the Americans were increasingly worried he did not intend to keep (Sigur Jr. 1990).

Throughout April, the two sides exchanged two more sets of edits, debating over how to characterize the political progress that had, at least according to Chun, already been made, and how explicitly to discuss the upcoming end of his term. In a memo discussing the final

0. English translations were either included in the original KNDA documents or are author’s translation

Table 4.1: Evolution of Drafted Press Remarks for President Reagan, April 1985

레이건대통령의 신문발표문 교섭내용 (Negotiation Points for President Reagan's Press Remarks)		
Date	Korean	English
Korean Proposed Points (April 9)	• 제 5공 한국 하에서 이룩한 한국의 민주발전 성과 평가 - 한국정부의 개방과 안정을 위한 노력환영 - 대통령각하의 헌정수호 결의 지지 및 영도력 찬양	• <u>Evaluation of the results of democratic development achieved under the Fifth Republic of Korea</u> - Welcome the Korean government's efforts toward openness and stability - Support your excellency the President's resolute determination to protect the constitution and praise for his leadership
American Proposed Draft (April 18)	"전대통령은 1988년 그의 임기 말에 이루어질 '평화적 정권 이양' 공약의 천을 위한 준비로서, 보다 개방적인 정체를 위하여 그의 정부가 취해온 조치들에 관하여 본인 에게 설명하였다. 본인은 한국이 자국의 팔목 할만한 경제성장과 상응하는 정치 발전을 이룩함에 도움을 줄 그러한 조치들에 대하여 우리의 지속적인 지지를 표명하였다."	"President Chun described for me the steps his Government has taken toward a more open and stable polity, which will prepare him to achieve a peaceful transfer of power as promised at the end of his term in 1988. I expressed our continuing support for such steps that will help Korea achieve political development that corresponds to its remarkable economic growth."
Korean Suggested Edits to American Draft (April 20)	"전대통령은 보다 개방적이고 안정된 정체를 위하여 한국 정부가 취해온 재조치들에 관하여 본인에게 설명하였다. 이와관련하여 본인은 전대통령의 영도하에 대한 민국이 이룩한 정치발전 성과를 평가하였다. 본인은안정에 바탕을 둔 지속적인 정치발전이 평화적 정권이양의 기초를 확보함에 긴요하다는 전대통령의 견해에 공감하고, 대한민국의 헌정 수호를 위한 전대통령의 결의를 지지하였다."	"President Chun described for me the steps his Government has taken toward a more open and stable polity. <u>In this regard, I appreciated the achievements in the political development of the Republic of Korea under President Chun's leadership. Sharing President Chun's view that steady political development based on stability is essential to securing the foundation for a peaceful transfer of power, I also supported President Chun's determination to safeguard the constitutional order of the Republic of Korea.</u> " (underline included)
Second American Draft (April 23)	[Not included in KNDA documents]	
Additional Requests to Add to American Draft (April 20 and 23)	* 대체 문안 제시 - 전대통령, 한국의 개방조치 설명 - 전대통령 영도하 정치발전 성과 평가 - 안정을 바탕으로 한 정치발전이 평화적 정권교체에 긴요 - 전대통령의 헌정 수호 결의 지지	*Suggested alternative text - President Chun, explain Korea's opening measures - Evaluate achievements in political development under President Chun's leadership - The necessity of political development based on stability in the peaceful transfer of power - Support for President Chun's resolute determination to protect the constitution
Transcript of Remarks Delivered by Reagan (April 26)	"President Chun explained the steps his government has taken to further promote freedom and democracy. I welcomed the considerable progress that has already been made and expressed continuing support for such steps, which are contributing to the attainment of political progress. I reiterated our support for President Chun's commitment to a peaceful transfer of power at the end of his term in 1988."	

Note: English translations were either included in the original KNDA documents or are author's translation

American draft sent on the night of April 25, the Koreans agreed to move forward with the wording of the section on Chun's presidency, as long as the Americans deleted two phrases that they "absolutely could not accept": "with moderation on all sides" and "commensurate with Korea's remarkable growth." The former implies a balance with the opposition that Chun was likely trying to avoid, and the latter likely dredged up feelings about the framing of trade issues, which already seemed to have been resolved in the draft at that point. The final version of the remarks as delivered by Reagan the next day reflected this final wording, without the two offending phrases:

"President Chun explained the steps his government has taken to further promote freedom and democracy. I welcomed the considerable progress that has already been made and expressed continuing support for such steps, which, with moderation on all sides, are contributing to the attainment of political progress commensurate with Korea's remarkable economic growth, I reiterated our support for President Chun's commitment to a peaceful transfer of power at the end of his term in 1988." (*THE PRESIDENT'S POST-MEETING PRESS STATEMENT* 1985)(underlines included in the original document)

This back and forth demonstrated both the coordination and contestation that characterized the bilateral relationship at this time. The two sides worked closely together on multiple levels of government to ensure that the final product was at least minimally acceptable to both sides. For the Koreans, the goal was to have Reagan publicly affirm once again the U.S. commitment to the alliance, including Chun's own government. Having benefited from the residual legitimization of Chun that followed from the 1981 summit [cite Lee and some other background here/in footnotes], the Korean administration explicitly and repeatedly requested that the press remarks include a mention of American support not just for Korean political growth generally, but of the constitution in particular.

The United States, for its part, had started to slowly move away from the "quiet diplomacy" of Reagan's first term, and no longer seemed willing to be so vocally supportive of authoritarians, even among its allies. Indeed, according to Korean records, Paul Wolfowitz, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, pushed back on Korean re-

quests for stronger verbal reassurances in the press remarks, saying that while he understands the importance of “political stability and peaceful regime change,” and expressed appreciation for ongoing progress on those fronts, the administration would need to be “cautious” in these press remarks to avoid perceptions of bias toward one side of the domestic political situation, which may prompt criticism in the U.S. media (대사 1985). According to the memo, Wolfowitz made specific reference to the press remarks during the 1983 Reagan-Chun summit in Seoul, which Wolfowitz said caused “problems” for the U.S. government. The negotiations over that portion of the 1985 statement just two years later therefore stand in stark contrast to the indistinct language in the 1983 statement, a fact Wolfowitz seemed to explicitly emphasize in his conversations with the Koreans.

In short, this negotiation over the language that would appear in Reagan’s press remarks in April 1985 represented a clear shift in the underlying policy of the Reagan administration toward Chun Doo Hwan, a shift visibly reflected in the rhetoric the Americans were willing to use publicly to talk about the Korean leader. This time, the Americans were not willing to provide explicit political assurances to Chun (or, at least, to keep discussion of the domestic situation in Korea vague) in the same way that they were in the past. However, the rhetorical stakes were about to rise even higher as the supposed end of Chun’s term drew closer. In fact, Reagan’s “quiet diplomacy” toward Seoul was reaching its limit.

4.2.4 1987: Quiet Diplomacy’s Breaking Point

In the next two years, concerns over the future of Chun’s administration had grown both in Korea and abroad. In June 1987, Koreans took to the streets to protest Chun Doo Hwan’s decision to designate a successor for his presidency – Roh Tae Woo. This led to a crisis situation in which many expected Chun to declare martial law and crack down on the protests, thus cementing the fears of critics that he (or, at least, his faction) intended to stay in power long past the promised 1988 deadline for election reform.

In a collection of memoirs from American and Korean ambassadors, American Ambassador James Lilley discussed the beginning of 1987 through the June uprising in great detail. In particular, he described the balance the American side had to strike between making objections to the Chun's plans clear, but without raising doubts on the security front for either their ally or for adversaries in the region. In this vein, Lilley described the American rhetorical approach to the Koreans at the time as shifting toward a stronger stance on democratic reform, but still including consistent messaging on security issues throughout as a form of reassurance (*Ambassadors' Memoir* 2009).

Diplomats, journalists, and historians alike seem to trace a major turning point in American rhetoric about Chun to one particular speech.¹ On February 6, 1987, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Gaston Sigur made a pivotal speech at the U.S.-Korea Society in New York City. In the speech, Sigur once again discussed the peaceful transfer of power that Chun himself promised to pursue the following year. Even worse, Sigur explicitly referenced the need for "civilianizing" Korean politics, a phrase that was of particular concern for the Chun administration.

"At present, there appears to be a general consensus among South Koreans of various political persuasions that domestic political practices up to now- however well suited they may have been for a simpler, slower moving past- simply are inadequate to meet Korea's complex present and future needs. First, there is the problem of the peaceful transfer of power from one leader to the next. President Chun Doo Hwan himself has pointed out that the country cannot afford long periods of one-man rule ending in violence and confrontation. Koreans also face the challenge of permanently 'civilianizing' their politics- of calling upon the full range of their talent resources to lead an increasingly complex economy and society. . . President Chun has recognized these trends and moved to implement the changes in the Republic of Korea's political institutions necessary to meet the demands of the next century. He has pledged to break the historical cycle of succession, instability, and uncertainty by peacefully transferring power at the end of his term in February 1988. . . President Chun deserves credit for his promise, and history will praise his service to the nation by making good on it. In

1. News coverage from the Washington Post of the subsequent detente mentioned this speech specifically, and detailed the evolving tenor of American statements toward Chun as a reflection of evolving U.S. policy (Oberdorfer 1987).

keeping this pledge, he also thrusts obligations on all his compatriots: to support a peaceful process while eschewing violence and to deal responsibly with the new phenomenon of a once-powerful president who has retired” (Sigur and United States 1987).

In Ambassador Lilley’s recollection of the speech, he referenced the phrase “civilianizing” as one of the key parts of Sigur’s rhetorical strategy. “Needless to say, the speech shook both the political and military establishments in South Korea” (*Ambassadors’ Memoir* 2009, 6). Indeed, Sigur’s own recollection of the speech, and Korean responses to it, was similar. In fact, when the interviewer asked Sigur whether he felt the speech was a means of calling Chun’s bluff, he agreed.

“This speech rather shook the political establishment in Korea, and the military establishment. Because, in that, I spoke of the need for the civilianization of the government. This was rather clear, what we meant there. I felt very deeply, as we all did, that we would take President Chun at his word that he intended to step down and that he intended to allow the people to choose his successor. So there was a great deal of interest, obviously, as I said, in Korea over that speech and what this meant, whether the United States was changing policy in the sense of withdrawing from full support of Chun. That was not the point. The point of the speech was to say that we support President Chun’s determination to step down” (Sigur Jr. 1990).

According to Sigur, President Chun specifically brought up his speech when he and Secretary Shultz met with him during their trip to Seoul about a month later.

“He [Chun] made some very flattering remarks about me as a friend of Korea and all this. He knew that, and everybody knew that and so forth. And he said, ‘While some of the words you used in that speech caused some difficulty to some of our people, I know that you understand the Korean situation well, and I think that the way in which you expressed yourself shows that.’ At that point, Secretary Shultz said, ‘And I hope you understand, Mr. President, that that speech is the basic policy of the American government. This is the policy of the president and of me. And so read it carefully and take every word, because that is our policy.’ That was important that he say that. He also said it publicly at a press conference, he was asked if my speech actually reflected the views of the president, and he said, ‘In every comma, in every dot of the i...that is the policy.’ Now this was very interesting. As I said, it sort of gave them an understanding, not necessarily from Chun’s point of view, but from the point of view of other

people who might have different points of view, particularly in the military, that this really is what the United States felt. Look, Korea is an independent country, they can do what they choose, but we felt we had to make our position clear” (Sigur Jr. 1990).

From the outside, this speech seems like a verbal slap on the wrist at most. But because it came amidst the established pattern of “quiet diplomacy,” Sigur’s speech sent a shockwave through the bilateral relationship. As Sigur pointed out, American officials assessed that Korea was well attuned to the explicit and implicit messages contained in this speech; archival records from the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time confirmed that analysis. As one of the top officials in the U.S. Government focused purely on Asia policy, the Korean diplomatic corps paid close attention to what Sigur said publicly throughout his tenure. However, in 1987, they were laser-focused on his speeches. The archive includes transcripts and analyses of Sigur’s appearances at a variety of organizations in the U.S. that year, reporting on and analyzing his rhetoric in some cases down to the word.

For example, in a memo reporting on Sigur’s response to questions at an appearance in front of the Foreign Policy Association on July 22, 1987, the Koreans reported Sigur’s answers while including several of the key words in the original English within the translation to ensure clarity of the original message. The fact that some words were highlighted in this manner, and that the Korean diplomats writing this memo wanted to make sure that the original word that Sigur chose was reported, indicates that they wanted to report Sigur’s words verbatim when it came to these sensitive and evolving issues (총영사 1987).²

“미국은 조용한 외교(QUIET DIPLOMACY)를 기조로 하고 있으나 민주적 발전의 증 요성에 관해서는 분명한 입장 표명을 수시로 해왔는바 83.11. 레이건 대통령 방한시 의: 연설, 87.2. 본인의 연설등이 그 예임.” (관리 번호 87-1788, 제목 : 시거 국무차관보 연설, p. 1) “군부는 일반적으로 노태우대표의 입장을 지지하고 있는 것으로 보이며, 따라서 유혈(BLOOD)을 원치않으며 국제사회의 존경(INT’L RESPECT)과 민주화를 희망하고 있다고 봄. 군부내 일부가 이러한 입장

2. It is common in these Korean archival documents assessing and analyzing Reagan’s rhetoric to see inclusion of original English phrases alongside translation and/or analysis in order to ensure clarity not just on the gist but on the exact wording that the Americans used in specific moments.

에 반대할 우려가 없는것은 아니지만, 이들 소수의 여사한 시도가 성공할 것으로는 보지 않음. 여야를 막론하고 관계당사자가 자제(RESTRAINT)를 보여야하고, 타협(COMPROMISE)을 해야하는 이유가 바로 여기에 있음.” (관리 번호 87-1788, 제 목 : 시거 국무차관보 연설, p. 1-2) (대사 1985).

Another Korean memo specifically, and in great detail, contrasted Sigur’s February 6 speech with a later speech in July, after the June uprising had quieted down. In both cases, the Koreans summarized the key points in Sigur’s speeches, particularly focusing on how Sigur characterized the domestic political situation in Korea and American security commitments. Finally, they specifically compared and contrasted the two speeches, including sections on “Common Points” and “Key Points of Emphasis and Differences” (see below), indicating that the Korean side was using the change in rhetoric from Sigur in the two speeches to trace how the United States was reacting to the changing political situation in Seoul (시거 국무차관보 아국관계 연설 검토 1987).

Interestingly, as Sigur himself discussed in his interview, the groundbreaking speech of February 1987 did not actually follow the idealized process of diplospeak creation from the start. Typically, as I have described in detail throughout this dissertation, policy is primary - usually, the administration would have decided from the top to move away from quiet diplomacy and rhetorical policy would subsequently begin to reflect that change. Instead, in this case, Sigur’s speech was the exception that proves the rule. In early 1987, Sigur decided to push the boundaries of a shifting policy, which naturally frustrated Shultz. By the time he was sitting across from Chun, however, Schultz had been convinced. In that moment, as Chun asked for clarification and Shultz repeated the new push for “civilianization,” a new diplospeak convention was born.

Table 4.2: Korean Analysis of Sigur's 1987 Speeches
(February 6, 1987 and July 21, 1987)

	Korean	English
공통점 Common Points	- 미국의 확고한 대한안보공약 결의 천명 - 국내 정치문제에 대한 불간섭 중립원칙 확인 - 보호무역주의 극복을 위한 한.미간 공동대처 촉구	- Declaration of America's firm commitment to Korean security - Confirmed policy of noninterference and neutrality in domestic political issues - Pressed for joint effort between the U.S. and Korea to overcome trade protectionism
중점강조사항- 차이점 Points of Emphasis- Differences	2.6. 연설 - 여.야간 대화와 타협에 의한 합의개현의 당위성 강조 - 군부의 국방임무 전념 및 정치의 문민화 강조 - 아국내 새로운 정치체제의 창조노력을 고무하는 미국의 역할 의사 표명 7.21 연설 - 아국의 민주화 조치를 크게 환영 - 한반도의 긴장완화와 건설적인 남북한 관계의 개시를 위한 북한 및 북한동맹국들의 합리적 자세 촉구 - 서울올림픽이 남북한간 새로운 평화시대의 개시를 위한 역사적인 기회임을 강조하고 이를 위한 미국의 건설적 역할 의사 표명	2.6 Speech - Emphasized the imperative for an opening of negotiations between the ruling and opposition parties based on dialogue and compromise - Emphasized dedication of military authorities to national defense and political civilianization - Expressed America's role in encouraging the creation of a new Korean political system 7.21 Speech - Greatly welcome steps toward democratization in Korea - Pressed for reasonable posture from North Korea and its allies in order to a relax tensions on the Korean Peninsula and begin constructive relations between North and South - Emphasized that the Seoul Olympics are a historic opportunity to begin a new peaceful era between North and South Korea, and expressed America's constructive role toward that goal.
결론 Conclusion	- 2.6. 연설이 아국내 합의개현을 통한 평화적 정부이양의 역사적 중요성을 역설한데 비해 7.21 연설은 88 서울올림픽과 아국의 민주화 발전이라는 두개의 유리한 여건을 바탕으로 향후 남북한 긴장대립 상황을 새로운 평화 구조로 전환시키고자 하는 미국의 적극적 의지를 표명한 것	- As compared with the February 6 speech, which emphasized the historical importance of a peaceful transfer of government through the opening of negotiations, the July 21 speech expressed America's active support for a change from a situation of North-South tensions to a new peace regime based on the Seoul Olympics and democratic development in South Korea.

Note: English translations are the author's

4.3 Conclusion

In the 1980s, as South Korea underwent a period of significant turmoil both in terms of its domestic situation and its relationship with its long-term ally, the United States, both sides were aware of the importance of public rhetoric. From the American side, they worked with the Koreans to draft joint statements and press materials for the summits in 1981 and 1983 with an understanding that a strong statement on democratization would cause questions about American commitments to the alliance and shake cooperation with Chun and his government. However, when Washington's patience with Chun ran thin by 1985, they insisted on making a much stronger statement, putting their foot down against strong Korean objec-

tions and including not only a discussion of political development but specifically including public mentions of the end of Chun's term in 1988 in order to communicate that the U.S. felt strongly about him keeping that pledge.

As recollections from diplomats in charge of Korea policy at the time make clear, they were willing to work with the Koreans, coordinating with their ally to find mutually acceptable policy rhetoric – to a point. When policy toward Chun's government shifted away from “quiet diplomacy,” shifting public rhetoric was explicitly part of the Reagan administration's strategy to increase pressure on Chun to support democratization measures. Even just a few simple words – like Sigur's use of “civilianization” in February 1987 – was deliberately calculated to signal an increasing impatience in Washington toward Seoul – a message that was received loud and clear. As for the Korean side, they were extremely attuned to American rhetoric throughout this period, with a particular focus on ensuring strong, public, and constant security assurances from the Reagan administration as well as strong, explicit support for Chun as a leader.

This case therefore provides a lens through which we can see the unique challenges of diplomatic rhetoric in the context of a close, well-established bilateral relationship. On one hand, the alliance allowed the two sides to explicitly coordinate over even minor rhetorical choices, helping to communicate intentions more clearly both on the private level and in the final version of public statements. At the same time, however, this does not mean that both sides easily agreed over wording, or that explicit coordination did away with the need for analysis based on established patterns of diplospeak.

Indeed, the Koreans clearly followed American statements of policy toward the Peninsula, assessing American intentions based on certain key phrases and, most importantly, shifts in rhetoric over time. In the contestation over President Reagan's press statement after the 1985 bilateral meeting, the Koreans wanted to ensure that the statement would 1) not raise questions about a shift in American commitment toward Chun and 2) not create a precedent

for future policy, especially as it related to the key issues of democratization and trade policy. Finally, in 1987, it was not just that Sigur's speech was concerning to the Chun government in a vacuum, it was that the speech represented a much harder line in comparison with previous approaches based on quiet diplomacy. In other words, throughout the 1980s, both sides were well aware of when and how they created expectations over diplospeak, especially as they related to both security assurances and approaches to Korean domestic politics.

In short, this case demonstrates that diplospeak conventions within friendly bilateral relationships are the product of a process of both coordination and contestation. Unlike with adversaries, communication between allies is consistent, takes place over many fora, and can be conducted both in public and in private. One would think, therefore, that there would be no need for excessive analysis of public diplomatic rhetoric – after all, could the two sides not just clarify using supposedly more credible private discussions? However, this chapter makes clear that public statements are also taken seriously as a source of information for diplomats analyzing policy intentions, even among close allies. In fact, deviations from established diplospeak conventions – such as an insistence on changing the way Reagan would discuss Chun and his government – were a serious cause for concern among the Koreans, who saw it for what it was – a signal of changing American strategies toward the authoritarian regime in Seoul.

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CHAPTER 5

DIPLOSPEAK THAT CONVEYS RESPECT

5.1 Introduction

On July 15, 1971, U.S. President Richard Nixon shocked the world by announcing that he had accepted an invitation to visit the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This strong policy shift, coming after years of icy relations between Washington and Beijing, might have seemed sudden at first glance, but a careful read of public statements in the lead-up to the visit reveals clues that foreshadowed the coming détente. Up until February 1971, President Nixon exclusively referred to China as either “Red China” or “Communist China” (“ChiComs,” for short), and vocally proclaimed that the government in Taiwan was the sole legitimate representative of China. But on February 25, 1971, in Nixon’s *Second Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy*, we see him use, for the first time in a formal document, the country’s full title: “People’s Republic of China” (Nixon 1971). By February 10, 1972 (a week before the surprise presidential trip to the country), even the more neutral term, “Mainland China,” disappeared (Nixon 1972); from then on, the Nixon Administration continued using only the country’s preferred, formal title in its public statements.

These changes did not go unnoticed. As the administration’s rhetoric slowly morphed on the surface, behind the scenes, Nixon’s Assistant for National Security Affairs, Henry Kissinger, was in Beijing engaging in secret talks with PRC Prime Minister Chou En-Lai to pave the way for the president’s visit. During one meeting, Prime Minister Chou explicitly noted the U.S. Government’s changing rhetoric, saying “Recently you have in fact been referring to us as the People’s Republic of China, and we refer to you as the United States of America. Doesn’t that imply normal relations.” In response, Kissinger admitted that the shift was meant to send a message to the Chinese: “We deliberately referred to you as the

People's Republic of China for the first time in a public document of the United States as a symbol of the direction we want to go, and therefore you understand us correctly, that is we want normalization and we want friendship" (Lord 1971).

This interaction was not a historical anomaly. In his memoir, former Deputy Secretary of State William Burns even drew explicit parallels to the Washington-Beijing détente when discussing President Barack Obama's diplomatic overtures to the Iranians in 2009: "As with China in the early 1970s, it made sense to employ careful and incremental tactics at the outset, but as part of a coherent long-term strategy. 'We should set,' I said, 'an early tone of respect and commitment to direct engagement, however severe our differences'" (Burns 2019, 346). One of those careful and incremental tactics was a shift in public rhetoric intended to mirror the administration's increased interest in negotiations: "In March, the president sent a videotaped Nowruz message to the Iranian people and, in a subtle effort to signal his lack of interest in forcing regime change, referred to the government by its formal name – the Islamic Republic. He committed the United States to 'engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect.'" A few weeks later, the reply came from Iran's Supreme Leader: "His message was rambling, but at least by the standards of revolutionary Iranian rhetoric not especially edgy or sharp. While it offered no explicit reply to the president's offer of direct dialogue, we understood it nevertheless as a serious indication of his willingness to engage" (ibid, 348).

In both moments, decades apart, a leader wanted to communicate a posture of openness toward an adversary and chose to do so, at least in part, by making a change in the rhetoric used to refer to that adversarial state. In day-to-day communications like the ones described above, in which President Nixon signaled a willingness to engage with China and President Obama extended a rhetorical olive branch to Iran, the communicative tool of choice was just a seemingly minor change in wording. And yet, these vocabulary decisions were deliberately deployed to send a message, and were explicitly recognized as such. Expanding on much of

the international relations literature on signaling between states, which focuses on when, how, and why states can make their signals more credible, I instead ask a more baseline question: *How was the change of title recognized as a meaningful signal in the first place, and how would listeners know to interpret the rhetorical change as an indication of a willingness to talk?*

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I detailed a theory of communication between states based on conventions of diplospeak – through iterated interactions built up over time, diplomats learn to deploy vocabularies of diplomatic rhetoric to send and receive messages using even seemingly minor changes in word choice. In this chapter, I show empirically how states deploy one type of diplospeak convention – words that convey respect – to send verbal signals to each other. Specifically, I use a novel dataset of nearly 16,000 statements from the U.S. government during the George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden administrations (January 2001-July 2024) to trace how they referred to the leaders of four long-time American adversaries – Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria – and map these shifts onto changes in U.S. sanction policy toward these states. This analysis therefore generates two key empirical outcomes: 1) honorific use in official state rhetoric does indeed follow distinct conventional patterns, and 2) those patterns are correlated with, and indeed precede, concrete changes in state policy. This chapter therefore empirically confirms my theory that this type of diplospeak convention – words that convey respect – can serve as a mechanism through which states can reveal their intentions to other states.

5.2 Types of Diplospeak: Conveying Respect

As discussed in the theory chapter of this dissertation, diplospeak conventions intended to convey respect are, in some ways, the easiest to empirically identify. This is because they are one of the few types of diplomatic rhetoric that has easily definable “rules.” The CIA, for example, maintains a constantly updating list of world leaders including the formal title

attached to each position – in Finland, “President,” in Qatar “Amir,” in Samoa, “Head of State” (“World Leaders,” n.d.). Indeed, many countries themselves keep an official “order of precedence” for their own governmental leadership, including the preferred titles for these officials.¹

Presumably, protocol (both diplomatic and otherwise) would dictate that the most respectful way to address someone is to use their preferred title. The fact that there are clearly delineated “correct” titles for world leaders therefore gives a useful baseline for a study of honorific use. If formal protocol always wins out, and diplomats just follow official guidelines by default, then we should see little to no variation in the titles used for a given leader over time. If, however, there is some sort of strategic granting and withholding of respect attached to title use, there should be significant variation in the way that states refer to specific leaders in their official statements. Indeed, as this chapter shows, the latter is true.

Tracing honorific use is also a particularly good way to show the communicative power of diplospeak because it is a type of rhetoric that is relatively divorced from other policy considerations. When studying threats, for example, there are (at least) two layers that need serious analytical consideration: the wording of the threat itself and the strategic context in which it is made. Was the rhetorical threat made alongside other threatening moves, such as putting troops on alert? Was it made during a campaign event that may be designed to activate audience costs mechanisms? While I still contend that the wording of threats matters in and of itself, and intend to continue exploring this aspect of diplospeak in future research, it is admittedly very hard to empirically disentangle the specific communicative power of words themselves from the threat environment in which they are communicated. Honorifics, however, have minimal policy implications in and of themselves beyond the diplospeak conventions attached to them. By showing that honorific use, *divorced from the rest of policy*

1. See, for example, (“DISPOSIZIONI GENERALI IN MATERIA DI CERIMONIALE E DISCIPLINA DELLE PRECEDENZE TRA LE CARICHE PUBBLICHE” 2008)(Italy) or (“Vocativos En Chile Para Autoridades Nacionales y Extranjeras,” n.d.)(Chile).

statements in which they are used, is still sufficient to establish a communicative pattern, I can be more confident that it is diplospeak *itself* that is facilitating policy communication.

5.2.1 *Argument in Brief*

States have developed a shared and mutually understood vocabulary of diplomatic rhetoric, sometimes so formalized that it is officially codified as protocol, that carries inherent communicative power within the context of state-to-state interactions. This is why, for example, President Obama calling Iran by its formal name is meaningful, as a return to adherence to formal protocol that had previously been withheld by Washington when referring to its long-time adversary. I therefore conceptualize wording choices as visible indicators of underlying policy intentions. In other words, diplospeak conventions that convey respect serve as a barometer through which one can trace policy shifts over time. I use this chapter to identify a central observable implication of my theory of diplospeak: that even small changes in wording choice that seem innocuous from the outside are observable indicators of the landscape of a state's policy preferences.

In the following sections, I introduce a novel dataset of more than 16,000 official, public statements from both the White House and the State Department covering four different presidential administrations: George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. In the analysis below, it is important to keep a few key assertions in mind. If I am wrong that honorifics meaningfully map onto policy and they are truly just unimportant or a matter of bureaucratic uniformity, the titles used for a given leader should vary only a small amount, if at all, over time. Another alternative explanation might argue that these honorifics are just a matter of personal style, that some leaders (most notably President Trump) may be less worried about formalities than others. If that were the case, we should see honorifics vary only according to changes in administration. Instead, as my data shows, honorifics vary significantly over time, and they shift both *within* and *across* administrations. Further, this

chapter empirically shows that rhetorical variance maps well onto specific, concrete policy changes – acts imposing or removing sanctions. These results lend strong credence to my theory that conventions of diplospeak – in this case, patterns in honorific use – are far from arbitrary or fixed, and instead meaningfully communicate policy changes.

5.3 Methodology

If I am right that conventions of diplomatic rhetoric help states communicate their underlying policy, I should be able to observe how patterns in honorific use in my dataset correlate with patterns of state policy. I therefore conceptualize rhetoric (specifically honorifics), as my independent variable, and policy changes (conceptualized here as the onset or removal of sanctions action) as my dependent variable.

I construct my main independent variable of interest – use of various titles for adversarial state leaders by the U.S. government – using a novel corpus of official government statements from January 2001-July 2024 (covering the start of the George W. Bush administration through the middle of the Biden Administration). My dependent variable consists of official U.S. sanctions actions – either adding or removing sanctions against my states of interest – throughout this same period. Finally, I use the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) 5.0 dataset from the Correlates of War Project (Palmer et al. 2022) as an alternative independent variable to help test how well my titles dataset performs as a predictor of U.S. sanctions policy compared with another potential predictive variable.² In this way, I am able to show that not only do rhetorical choices (in my case, titles) perform just as well if not better than the onset of MIDs at foreshadowing state policy, I can also rule out the idea that official statements are merely reactions to provocative world events. While there are other datasets that capture international incidents, and there are known limitations with the MIDs dataset (Fordham and Sarver 2001; Kushi and Toft 2023), I use this dataset both because of the type

2. The MIDs variable is coded as 1 for the day of onset according to the MIDs 5.0 dataset, and 0 otherwise.

of incidents it specifically includes (interstate disputes including threats and displays of force as well as actual uses of force) and its establishment as a standard within the literature.³ For my purposes, the main downside to using this dataset as a point of comparison is that the MIDs 5.0 update only covers incidents through 2014, whereas my datasets run through the middle of 2024. Especially considering the focus during the Trump administration on the president’s rhetoric and its potential impacts on U.S. policy, I believe it is important to analyze this period. I therefore present results for the full titles and sanctions dataset from 2001-2024 alongside multivariate results from 2001-2014 that include MIDs, and then conclude the results section with a brief qualitative discussion of rhetorical choices during the Trump Administration to supplement my quantitative findings. Below, I describe the construction of my two novel datasets, present my results, then discuss implications for our theory of diplomatic rhetoric.

5.3.1 *IV: Titles*

While the study of diplospeak will hopefully lead to a broader examination about the importance of diplomatic language more broadly, in this chapter I focus on one particular type of rhetorical choice – words that convey (dis)respect. Specifically, I scope my inquiry to the United States’ statements toward the leaders of four countries – Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. To be clear, my argument could apply to statements about friendly states too. If the status quo – the established rules of a language game – dictate that interactions should be respectful and friendly, then moments of disrespect could prove interesting as a site of inquiry as well. To this end, an adversarial language game is vastly different from an allied language game. While President Obama calling Cuban President Fidel Castro merely “Fidel” or North Korean leader Kim Jong Un “Kim” is likely a purposeful withholding of status as a world leader, calling Chancellor Angela Merkel “Angela” could instead be intended as a

3. See (Henke 2017; McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017; Barnes and O’Brien 2018; McManus 2018; Katagiri and Min 2019) for some recent examples of work that uses MIDs as an independent or control variable.

sign of close friendship. In other words, the rhetoric used by states, much like the words we choose in our own daily lives and relationships, is highly context-dependent. Therefore, in order to consistently compare the granting and rescinding of official titles, I choose to focus first only on states with a long-standing adversarial relationship to the United States.⁴

In selecting cases, I started with the original Axis of Evil as articulated by President George W. Bush during the 2002 State of the Union Address – Iran, Iraq, and North Korea – as well as the expanded Axis according to then-UN Ambassador John Bolton – Libya, Syria, and Cuba (Bolton 2002). The benefit of using this list is that it explicitly enumerates the top adversaries of the United States, who have been described in strongly negative terms even after the Axis of Evil was no longer in active use (with subsequent administrations using similar designations like “Rogue States,” for example (B.B.C. 2017)). I eventually chose to drop Iraq and Libya from the list of cases because the two countries went through significant political shifts throughout the period of inquiry, most particularly major change(s) of regime. Comparing the titles used for Muammar Gaddafi in Libya pre-2011 to those used for any of the revolving door of (at times disputed) leaders in the country now would make little sense. The same goes for the tumultuous politics of Iraq since early 2001, much of which is directly entwined with American actions in the country and the region. In these two cases, it would be very difficult to say whether any changes in American rhetoric reflected a policy shift in Washington or were the result of other endogenous factors. Therefore, I focus my textual analysis on the following four cases: Iran, North Korea, Cuba, and Syria.⁵ As mentioned above, by choosing cases where the rhetorical status quo is assumed to be negative, I will be able to clearly trace the moments when more neutral or even positive titles enter the

4. To show the difference between these adversarial relationships and an allied one, I include in the discussion section results for how the United States referred to German leaders during the same time period (2001-2024).

5. To solidify this case selection even further, these are the only four countries listed under the formal designation of State Sponsors of Terrorism as of 2024 (“State Sponsors of Terrorism,” n.d.), again indicating that these four states in particular have long-standing, similarly adversarial relations with the United States.

rhetical repertoire of the US Government.

My corpus consists of documents publicly released by the U.S. State Department and the White House from January 2001 through July 2024. From the State Department, I scraped all available transcripts of the department’s Daily Press Briefings as well as public statements, interviews, and remarks from relevant regional bureaus released during this time period.⁶ From the White House, I scraped public statements including daily press briefings, media interviews with the president, bilateral press conferences, and more from the archive maintained by the American Presidency Project at UC Santa Barbara (“The American Presidency Project,” n.d.). This procedure yielded 16,235 documents in total.

I then automatically pulled any explicit mention of the leader of each state,⁷ as well as the words directly before and after each mention. For example, for North Korean leaders Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, I pulled every mention of the word “Kim,” and manually reviewed the results, particularly identifying and removing any observations that were related to someone else with the name “Kim” (i.e. former US Ambassador to South Korea Sung Kim). Then, by pulling the words both before and after the name “Kim,” I was able to determine what title, if any, was attached to a given mention. Results such as “Chairman Kim was,” or “the Kim regime” were coded as “Chairman” and “regime,” respectively. Mentions such as “to Kim Jong Un” or “what Kim Jong Il has” would be coded as “no title,” because the phrase refers to the leader of North Korea merely by name without any associated honorific. Tables 1-4 show all the different titles that appeared in the dataset for each country, including mentions

6. For additional statements related to Cuba, I scraped archived sites for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs; for Iran and Syria, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs; and for North Korea the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

7. I included all heads of state that were in office from January 2001 to July 2024. This included Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un of North Korea; Fidel Castro, Raul Castro, and Miguel Díaz-Canel of Cuba; Bashar al-Assad of Syria; and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hassan Rouhani, and Ebrahim Raisi of Iran. President Masoud Pezeshkian took office on 28 July 2024, so although I did include his name as a search term, it only appeared once in a question from a reporter and was thus not included in the final dataset. For the sake of comparison across cases, I limit inquiry in the Iran case to the president as the main interlocutor between Tehran and other governments, while recognizing that the Ayatollah also plays an important role in Iran’s leadership structure.

where the leader’s name is used but without any particular title or honorific (marked as “no title”).

Table 5.1: Titles Used for Cuban Leaders

	no title	regime	President	Mr.	dictator	government	general	tyrant	Other, Neutral	junta	Other, Negative	Sum
State	317	134	17	24	23	23	4	2	2	2	2	550
White House	59	55	74	6	5	4	0	2	1	0	0	206
Sum	376	189	91	30	28	27	4	4	3	2	2	756

Table 5.2: Titles Used for Iranian Leaders

	President	no title	government	Mr.	administration	regime	Sum
State	174	67	6	5	5	1	258
White House	126	30	4	5	2	0	167
Sum	300	97	10	10	7	1	425

Table 5.3: Titles Used for North Korean Leaders

	no title	Chairman	regime	leader	Mr.	dictator	government	Other, Negative	president	Supreme Leader	Sum
State	335	433	41	20	9	6	5	2	1	1	853
White House	173	59	7	18	9	1	0	1	0	0	268
Sum	508	492	48	38	18	7	5	3	1	1	1121

Table 5.4: Titles Used for Syrian Leaders

	no title	regime	President	government	Mr.	dictator	tyrant	leader	murderer	oligarchy	Sum
State	2536	2128	228	41	17	13	1	0	1	1	4966
White House	1149	1259	257	30	26	5	7	5	0	0	2738
Sum	3685	3387	485	71	43	18	8	5	1	1	7704

While there is some consistency in the titles used for each of these different leaders, there are also significant differences. For example, the formal, preferred title for the leader of Cuba, Iran, and Syria is “President,” while the North Koreans use, among other titles, “Chairman.” Therefore, to better examine trends in a consistent manner across each case, I assigned a numerical value from -1 to 1 to all of the honorifics that appear in the dataset based on how respectful or disrespectful each is relative to others within each country. To set a baseline, I first assigned each “no title” observation a score of 0. This works well because it is the most common title for three of the cases (Cuba, Iran, and North Korea), and second most common in the fourth (Syria). Further, the distribution of “no title” observations is

relatively consistent throughout each dataset over time. Any slightly more respectful titles that stopped short of using the official honorific for the leader in question, such as “Mr.,” “leader,” and “government,”⁸ received a score of 0.5. Only the full, formal title in each case – “Chairman Kim,” “President Assad,” etc. – was coded as a 1. On the negative side, I coded slightly negative but still legitimating terms like “regime” as -0.5, and explicitly derogatory terms like “dictator” or “junta” as -1. The overall summary statistics and data from each country are shown below. Figure 1 below shows trends in these titles over time for each country.⁹

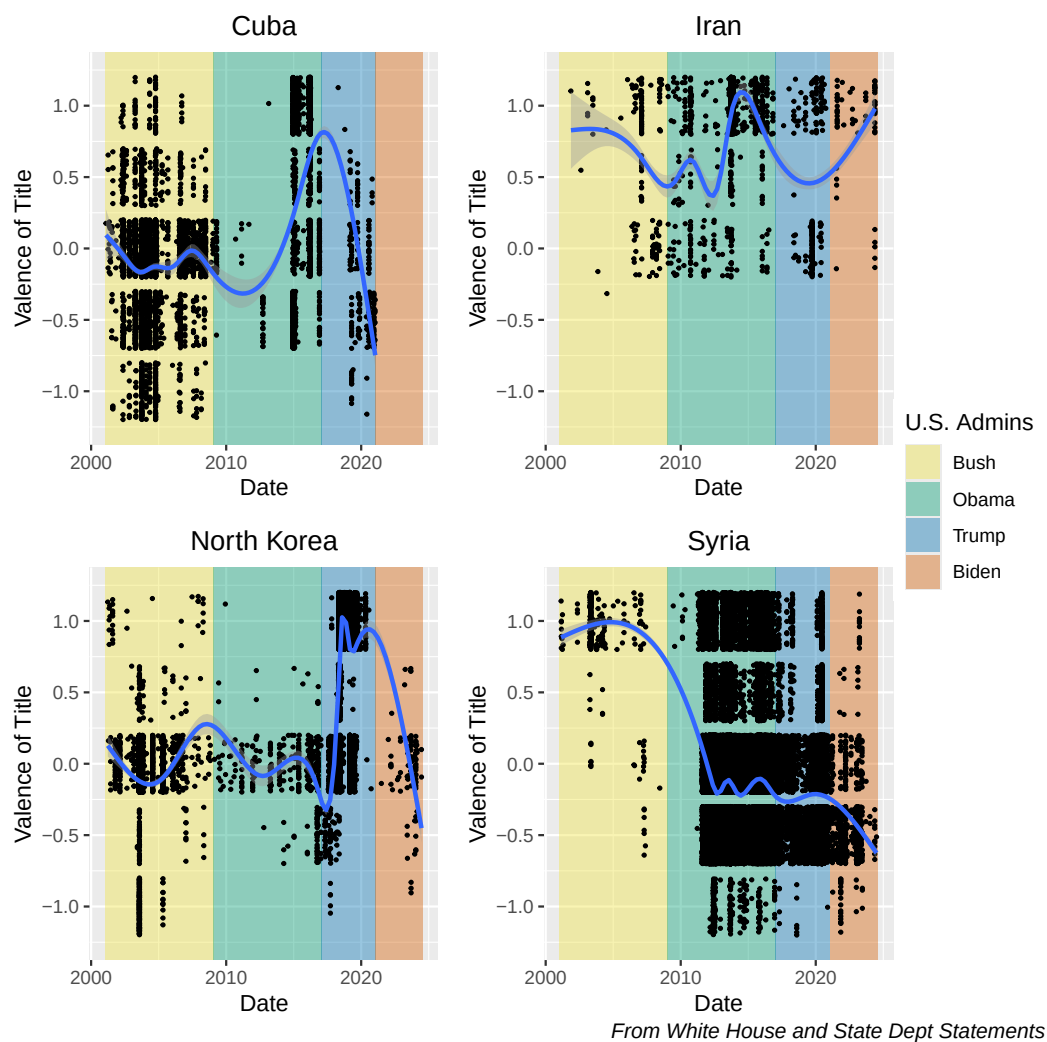
5.3.2 *DV: Sanctions Actions*

This chapter theorizes that the use of different titles is an indicator, an observable way to map the contours of U.S. policy, or an early sign of changes in posture toward the country in question. I make no claims to have found causal evidence for the specific intentionality behind any given shift, and leave that open for future research into this phenomenon. However, I theorize that by tracing rhetorical choices over time, I can reveal patterns of shifting U.S. foreign policy toward each of these four adversarial states. Therefore, to connect the titles dataset to concrete policy, I needed a consistent measure of U.S. foreign policy positions toward other states. To do so, I compiled a second dataset – changes in U.S. sanctions regulations and enforcement. As some of the most sanctioned states in the world, there is a consistent flow of executive orders, laws, and other enforcement actions that the United States has taken against each of these states during my period of interest. However, there are indeed patterns to when, and how broadly, new sanctions are announced and enforced.

8. E.g. “the Ahmadinejad government,” “the government of Fidel Castro,” etc.

9. Although this chapter focuses on honorifics, it is interesting to note some gaps in the data below, especially for Cuba. During some of those periods the country in question was deprioritized; during others, we see a spike in discussions of “the Cubans” or “the Cuban government” without mentioning the leader by name. This could be an attempt to depersonalize the conflict and potential détente, marking it as a discussion between two states rather than between individual leaders (Curran and Gibson 2020). I plan to expand this research agenda to further investigation of related diplomatic rhetoric in future projects.

Figure 5.1: US Government Mentions of Country Leaders



There are even periods where sanctions are suspended or loosened, such as in June 2008 when President George W. Bush removed North Korea from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism as part of ongoing negotiations with Pyongyang (Bush 2008).

My second dataset tracks the onset of new sanctions, the removal of sanctions, or publicly announced sanctions enforcement actions related to the four countries of interest.¹⁰ Each instance was designated with a -1 or 1, depending on whether it was the imposition of more sanctions (-1) or the loosening of existing sanctions (1).¹¹ For example, the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced on April 10, 2020 that it was more strictly enforcing restrictions against North Korea. This announcement appears in the dataset under April 10 2020, and is coded as -1 because it indicates a negative movement in bilateral relations.

Table 5.5: Summary Statistics

Country	Mean, Titles	SD, Titles	Mean, Sanctions Onset	SD, Sanctions Onset
Cuba	0.031	0.521	0.021	0.175
Iran	0.821	0.366	-0.852	0.525
NK	0.558	0.556	-0.005	0.076
Syria	-0.140	0.364	-0.024	0.156

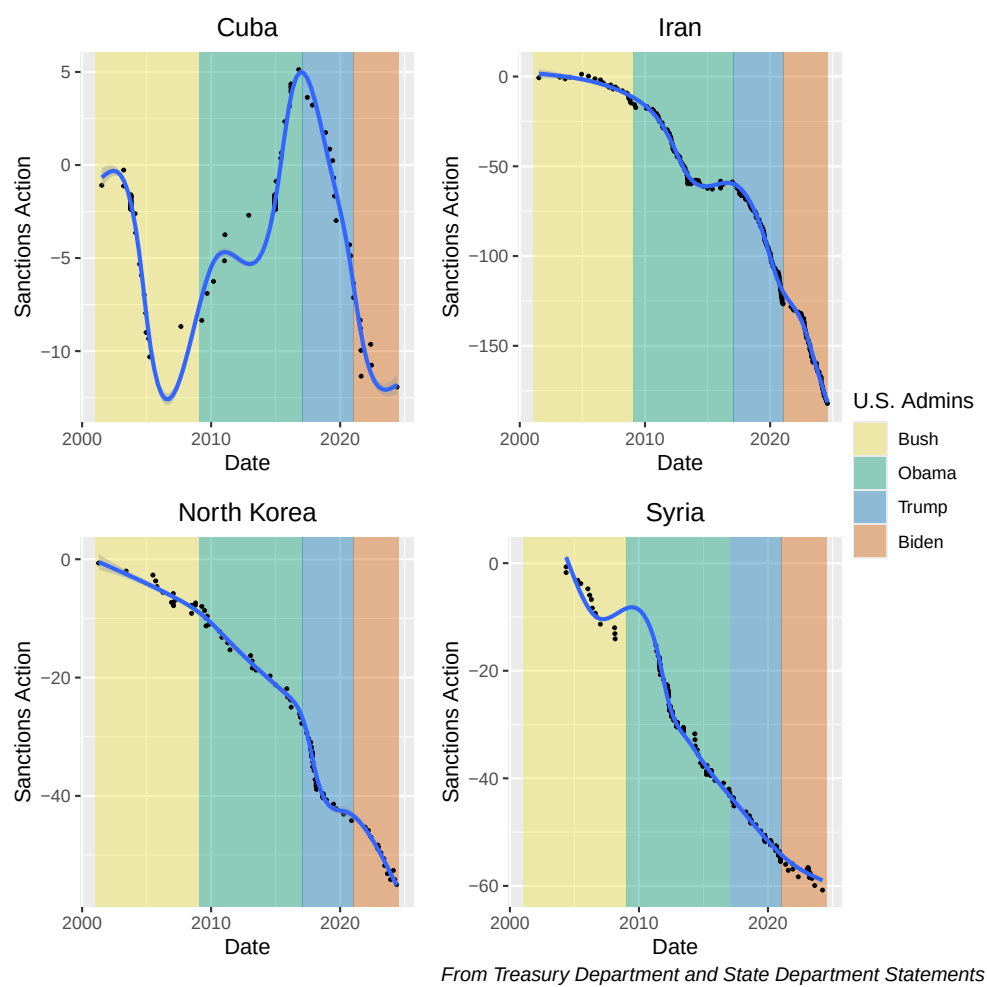
As Figure 2 above shows, although there are periods of stagnation, sanctions action is overwhelmingly negative over time. Therefore, to avoid stationarity issues,¹² my main results use differenced data, meaning that each sanctions action is coded as a -1 or 1, and non-action is coded with 0. The Appendix includes several other model specifications as

10. These consist of any presidential Executive Orders, changes to the Federal Register as announced by the Treasury Department, or publicly announced sanctions enforcement actions reported on the Treasury or State Department’s current or archived websites. These data points were then cross-referenced with Congressional Research Service (CRS) reports, which analyze overall sanctions policy and actions taken against each state in question.

11. The only exception to this is Executive Order 13716 (2016), which explicitly revoked five other executive orders. Because it invokes five other sanctions actions by name and specifically invalidates them, I decided to code this data point as a +5.

12. Augmented Dickey-Fuller Test $p = 0.01$.

Figure 5.2: US Government Sanctions Action (Cumulative)



robustness checks with similar results, including models using cumulative sanctions level and interpolation of missing data (days in which no leader was specifically mentioned), lending confidence to my findings.

5.3.3 *Results*

For the final results, I model all data together, although country fixed effects are reported in the results below for clarity. Table 6 shows the results for the full regression of my two novel datasets from 2001 to 2024 (Model 1), alongside multivariate regression including MIDs from 2001-2014 (Model 2), with all variables standardized. As these results show, the correlation between respect level and sanctions level is a direct one. In other words, an increase or drop in respect level (meaning the honorific used during a given time period) is associated with a similar movement in the onset of new sanctions. Put differently, more negative honorific use is associated with negative policy shifts in the form of new sanctions.

Model 2 shows the results when compared with another potential explanatory variable – MIDs onset. If sanctions policy is only beholden to world events, then MIDs should be highly correlated with sanctions action. As our results show, sanctions action is indeed directly correlated with world events; if a MID occurs between the U.S. and one of these countries, there is also likely to be sanctions action; however, this is contrary to expectations that sanctions policy is not beholden only to world events. If a MID occurs (coded as 1), one would expect a negative movement in sanctions policy in response. This result could easily be affected and explained by time, however. It is entirely possible, indeed reasonable, to expect sanctions action in response to a MID to take a few days at minimum to manifest. Table 7 therefore shows the same model specifications using a dynamic linear regression and a lag of 0-4 days (meaning a movement in sanctions action is correlated with movement in the IVs four days before, three days before, etc.).

These results indicate that the impact of additional interstate disputes (MIDs) is highly

Table 5.6: Predictors of U.S. Sanctions Policy

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Sanctions Action	
	Regression, 2001-2024	Regression with MIDs, 2001-2014
	(1)	(2)
Respect Level	0.031*** (0.003)	0.035*** (0.004)
MID Onset		0.060*** (0.003)
Iran	-0.555*** (0.029)	-0.523*** (0.034)
North Korea	-0.396*** (0.017)	-0.512*** (0.026)
Syria	-0.483*** (0.013)	-0.587*** (0.015)
Constant	0.443*** (0.013)	0.533*** (0.015)
Observations	152,641	94,451
R ²	0.010	0.019
Adjusted R ²	0.010	0.019
Residual Std. Error	1.048 (df = 152636)	1.055 (df = 94445)
F Statistic	398.591*** (df = 4; 152636)	363.814*** (df = 5; 94445)
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5.7: Lagged Predictors of U.S. Sanctions Action (by Day)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Sanctions Action	
	Regression, 2001-2024	Regression with MIDs, 2001-2014
	(1)	(2)
Respect Level (t)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.021*** (0.004)
Respect Level (t-1)	0.013*** (0.004)	0.018*** (0.004)
Respect Level (t-2)	0.012*** (0.004)	0.017*** (0.004)
Respect Level (t-3)	0.012*** (0.004)	0.017*** (0.004)
Respect Level (t-4)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.019*** (0.004)
MIDs Onset (t)		0.297** (0.129)
MIDs Onset (t-1)		0.732*** (0.272)
MIDs Onset (t-2)		-1.020*** (0.340)
MIDs Onset (t-3)		0.037 (0.310)
MIDs Onset (t-4)		0.016 (0.196)
Iran	-0.654*** (0.033)	-0.698*** (0.039)
North Korea	-0.458*** (0.018)	-0.558*** (0.028)
Syria	-0.498*** (0.014)	-0.622*** (0.016)
Constant	0.462*** (0.014)	0.569*** (0.016)
Observations	146,713	91,305
R ²	0.012	0.022
Adjusted R ²	0.012	0.021
Residual Std. Error	1.051 (df = 146704)	1.062 (df = 91291)
F Statistic	216.358*** (df = 8; 146704)	154.714*** (df = 13; 91291)
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

helpful in predicting potential sanctions action, but only when viewed two days ahead of time. However, my measure of respect level, proxied through uses of honorifics in official state rhetoric, is also a helpful, and indeed more consistent, predictor, with results from time t through $t-4$ (shifts in honorifics up to four days ahead of shifts in sanctions action) showing steady, significant coefficients in the models above. Additional data, especially more recent additions to the MIDs dataset, could help clarify this relationship even further.

5.4 Discussion

It is clear from the data that there are significant, noticeable shifts in the way that the United States Government has talked about the leaders of these four states over time, and that these changes appear to precede specific, concrete policy actions in the form of sanctions relief or tightening. There are discernible patterns in each case that indicate that U.S. officials are not merely drawing a title out of a hat and deploying it at random; nor are they defaulting to the formal, official title for each leader at all times. Instead, they are following established and mutually understood rules of a diplospeak convention, choosing titles that align with the contours of their states' policy in a given context. In this section, I address three potential alternative explanations for why honorific use might change over time: 1) rhetorical choices could be random and arbitrary, untethered to policy; 2) they could a way for states to respond to world events; or 3) they could merely be reflecting the personal style of the leader in charge at a given time. Below I discuss my results and the broad trends in the data, arguing that these patterns are more indicative of a diplomatic conventions story than one in which wording choices are arbitrary, the U.S. Government is merely changing their rhetoric in response to external events, or one in which a president's personal communication style is driving changes. I then examine the Trump administration's linguistic tendencies in depth to tease out more detail on the moments of rhetorical change and how they reflected that administration's shifting policies toward these four states.

Are these rhetorical choices arbitrary, or just reactions to ongoing events? Or are they truly tied to underlying policy? To some extent, it is hard to tell without knowing the specific intentionality behind any given shift. However, one key indicator that what I am seeing is the latter phenomenon – that a shift in title used for a foreign leader reveals a change in the underlying policy toward them – is timing. The data do show honorific use tends to change when a new leader enters office in DC, such as the noticeable drop in respect granted to Iran after President Trump took over from President Obama. But there are also clear shifts in the middle of administrations, indicating that this is not merely a function of who is in the White House.

Further, if these shifts are merely reactions to ongoing events, or ways to scold or punish American adversaries for actions that the United States does not like, then we would see changes generally taking place *after* one of these types of events. To be clear, those instances do appear from time to time. For example, titles take a one-month dip after North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon in October 2006; although they promptly bounced back up after the Six Party Talks leapt into action and got Pyongyang to agree to shut its Yongbyon nuclear facility just a few months later in early 2007. However, most of the shifts observed in my data are not reactionary. Rather, they largely follow two broad patterns, both of which are more indicative of a policy communication story than one in which states are merely reacting to the actions of others or wielding disrespect to criticize or shame their adversaries.

First, titles used by the U.S. Government tend to change either when a new administration begins, presumably bringing with them a new approach to foreign policy, or when a given administration's policy toward a given state changes. Second, they change *before* the U.S. takes a notably different public stance toward the country in question. My multivariate regression results support these contentions, showing that my titles data performs just as well if not better than the onset of interstate disputes (MIDs) in predicting U.S. sanctions

policy, a result that is robust and consistent four days ahead of a visible policy change. In short, this means that if you see a shift in the way that the U.S. is talking about its adversaries, you can, on the whole, anticipate a subsequent shift in real-world policy.

The first broad trend can be described as a changing of the guard – shifts in titles tend to occur when a new leader enters the White House. This makes intuitive sense, as a new administration will likely have different policy priorities and intentions toward the foreign leaders in question. These titles are therefore reflecting these new underlying policies, signaling whether a new administration will pursue a more or less adversarial track than their predecessor. I can see this phenomenon particularly well in the Cuba and Iran cases. For both, the titles used for Castro in Cuba and both Khatami and Ahmadinejad in Iran declined continuously throughout the Bush Administration, reflecting Washington’s increasingly adversarial stance toward the two countries throughout the 2000s. However, the graph immediately leveled out when Obama took office. This could be read as an early indicator that the new president was looking to steady relations between the United States and these two adversaries in a way Bush may not have been. The speed at which the titles settled, and the lack of precipitating events other than Obama’s entry to the White House, makes it clear that the shift in titles toward Castro and Ahmadinejad signaled an underlying shift in policy, not a reaction to outside events. The inverse can be seen in the titles used for Syria’s Bashar al-Assad. While the titles took a sharp dip in the early Obama years as the Syrian Civil War began in earnest, they reached an equilibrium in his second term, remaining negative but steady for years. When Trump took office, however, the titles immediately dropped even lower almost overnight, indicating the Trump Administration’s approach toward Syria may be more hardline.

The changing of the guard phenomenon is at play in the transitions between administrations. However, this does not explain the clear shifts that occur in the middle of a given U.S. president’s tenure in office. Take the Obama administration’s approach toward Cuba,

for example. When the Obama administration entered the White House in 2009, the titles used for then-President Raul Castro leveled off, remaining neutral for much of his first term. This changed, however, as Obama entered his second term, when there was a precipitous increase in the respect offered toward Castro. This preceded the eventual announcement in December 2014 that the two countries had been working to restore diplomatic ties. The titles used for Castro can therefore be seen as an early indicator that Obama was working behind the scenes to improve relations with Cuba, long before the final deal was officially reached and publicized.

The data show a very similar trend in the Obama administration's approach to Iran. While steady for the first years of Obama's presidency, titles used for Ahmadinejad began to rise around the time of his re-election. This pre-dated both Hassan Rouhani's election in August 2013 and the eventual announcement of the Joint Plan of Action in November that year. However, this shift aligns well with the leadup to the clandestine meetings between high-level American and Iranian leaders that eventually led to this diplomatic breakthrough. After briefly mentioning his desire for a diplomatic solution in this February 2013 State of the Union address (Obama 2013), President Obama then embarked on a series of clandestine meetings throughout 2013 with top-level officials meeting with their Iranian counterparts in order to kick-start talks that eventually led to the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) and then the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Lakshmanan 2015). Even prior to this, however, and certainly throughout the period before these backdoor talks became public, the titles used for Iran's leadership rose. Notably, this upward shift pre-dates the election of President Rouhani, so this trend is not merely a reflection of additional respect granted to a new leader of Iran who was broadly seen as more moderate and open to negotiations. Instead, I argue it is reflective of the underlying policy of engagement toward Iran that took shape in Obama's second term, as seen in the upswing in the formality of American rhetoric that was already underway before Rouhani even won his election.

As this discussion shows, patterns of rhetorical use throughout the 2000s are consistent with my policy communication story. If these changes were arbitrary, they would not follow such discernable patterns across four cases and four different administrations. If officials were just deploying diplospeak phrases in reaction to global events, we would not see these shifts *precede* major provocations. Finally, if official rhetoric is merely reflecting a leader's personal communication style filtered through official statements, we would see changes only when a new leader takes charge; this is not the case. I therefore contend that the data exclusively support my story, in which underlying policy decisions are driving the honorifics that appear in official statements. I next turn to a short discussion of the Trump administration. By examining this rhetorically idiosyncratic American president in more detail, I show that the data are far more consistent with strategic, diplomatic choices rather than merely reflecting Trump's personalistic diplomatic approach.

5.4.1 The Trump Administration: A Case Study in Rhetorical Change

Common wisdom about the Trump rhetorical strategy might lead one to expect two different patterns in how the administration referred to its adversaries. First, given the admittedly chaotic rhetorical choices that characterized the Trump communication strategy, one might expect the titles used for the leaders of Cuba, Iran, Syria, and North Korea to be somewhat random. This was not the case, however – all my cases showed consistent, patterned title use throughout Trump's four years in office. Alternatively, knowing Trump's contempt for protocol and his tendency to refer to many of his counterparts – even allies – in less than gracious ways, one might expect the titles to just be negative across the board. This pattern does hold in the case of Cuba and Iran – both countries with which President Obama pursued a *détente* that President Trump quickly reversed. In the Syrian case, while admittedly not a policy priority for the Trump administration, foreign policy rhetoric also followed the Obama administration's lead, maintaining the same overall negative tenor.

Perhaps the most instructive of all our cases, however, is North Korea. During the Trump administration, the honorifics used for North Korean leader Kim Jong Un shifted drastically over time, often right before the announcement of a similar shift in American posture toward Pyongyang. Looking more closely at the way the Trump administration referred to Kim Jong Un, it is clear that the shift from “Rocket Man” to “friend,” was not just part of Trump’s personal style, but actually reflective of broader patterns at the time.

Figure 5.3: Trump Administration Mentions of Kim Jong Un



In the early part of his tenure in the White House, President Trump was infamously aggressive toward Pyongyang and its leader, even threatening to rain “fire and fury” on North Korea in 2017 (Baker and Choe 2017). This period of antagonism is clearly visible in my data, which shows a dip toward the end of the Obama administration that drops even further when Trump took office. Then, in early 2018, the Trump administration began scoping out the idea of talks, eventually meeting in June 2018 in Singapore for the first-ever summit between a North Korean leader and a sitting U.S. president.

The data clearly reflect the Trump Administration's shift from volleying threats back and forth in 2017 to embracing negotiations in spring 2018. Throughout 2017 and even into early 2018, Trump Administration officials used the term "regime" regularly in reference to Kim, often within strongly negative statements about North Korea: "a new level of threat from North Korea associated with the unacceptable and erratic and unlawful behavior of the Kim regime – Kim Jong-un's regime – are represented by the murder of his brother using a nerve agent in a public place, in an airport, but also the increasing capability for destruction that that regime possesses in the form of a nuclear program and the ballistic missile program" (Senior Administration Official 2017); "This action targets the deceptive shipping practices that have enabled the Kim regime to fund its dangerous weapons programs" (Mnuchin 2018).

However, after the announcement on March 8 that President Trump would be willing to meet with Kim at some point in the coming months, "the Kim regime" disappeared from their vocabulary, replaced instead with a smattering of the word "leader," before use of the term "Chairman Kim" abruptly took over in May. On May 9, 2018, President Trump announced via Twitter that the North Koreans had agreed to release three American prisoners into the custody of Secretary Pompeo, who was in Pyongyang for negotiations (Choe 2018). The respectful term "Chairman Kim" appeared in official U.S. Government statements on the same day, with Secretary Pompeo telling reporters "I think that Chairman Kim is trying to set good conditions for the summit, right. I think we're – I think we are having good conversations, productive conversations" (Pompeo 2018a).

Uses of the term "Chairman" throughout the buildup to the June summit matched this increasingly optimistic tone, with U.S. officials even acknowledging North Korean negotiating positions, like in a press briefing from Secretary Pompeo on June 7: "It's our aim, through the "CVID" [complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization] process and providing the security assurances that Chairman Kim will want, that we can greatly reduce the risk that proliferation ever happens as a result of North Korean actions" (Pompeo 2018b). After the

Singapore Summit in June, the Trump Administration never again used a negative title for Kim, and continued to regularly use “Chairman Kim,” his preferred title, as they continually attempted to keep negotiations alive. In fact, there is a clear stretch between the September 2018 announcement of a second Trump-Kim summit and the eventual meeting in Hanoi in February in which the Trump Administration *never once* referred to Kim Jong Un with any other honorific than his most formal, respectful official title of “Chairman.” Then the data show a sudden return to more neutral ways of referring to Kim – particularly talking about the leader using his name alone with no title. That jump in the data happens to perfectly align with President Trump’s decision to walk away from a meeting in Hanoi and end the summit early. The clear line on May 9, 2018, when the respectful term of “Chairman” appeared in the Trump administration’s vocabulary overnight, is stark, as is the return to referring to Kim without any title at all starting on the exact day that the Hanoi Summit fell through in early 2019. As this data shows, there are clear patterns in how the U.S. government has referred to the leaders of adversarial states over time; with even the seemingly rhetorically volatile Trump administration using titles in ways that conform well with the contours of American policy.

Interestingly, one of the other terms the Trump administration used throughout this period – CVID – provides a contrast to show how diplospeak terms may *fail* to coalesce into a communicatively useful convention. In particular, remember that consistency is key for convention-making – without consistency, it is hard for the listener to zone in on what, exactly, an emerging diplospeak term is meant to convey. CVID was first coined by the Bush administration as “Complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement,” of the North Korean nuclear program, making this their goal for the Six Party Talks negotiations in the mid-2000s (Keating 2018a). In the Obama administration, the “D” was sometimes “dismantlement,” sometimes “denuclearization,” a trend that Trump officials continued. Even worse, Trump Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s use of “permanent, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement”

in May 2018 prompted enough questions that the South Korean foreign minister was forced to clarify that the U.S.-South Korean agreement to pursue CVID had not changed (Shim 2018). In the latter half of his tenure in office, Trump introduced a whole new term – FFVD ("final, fully verified denuclearization"), although it did not seem to catch on – perhaps because it was never clear the intended difference between “final” and “fully verified” as compared to CVID’s “complete” and “verifiable” denuclearization (Klingner 2018). Because of the lack of consistency and clarity about these phrases despite their use across more than 20 years of American North Korea policy, all parties involved, even Trump’s own National Security Advisor John Bolton (Keating 2018b), were able to define and deploy the phrase CVID to their liking, making it practically useless as an effective communicative tool.

5.4.2 Control Case: Germany

So far, I have shown that the ways the United States government refers to the leaders of adversarial states shift in accordance with changes in underlying policy. While I have established through both quantitative and qualitative assessments of honorific use that these shifts are not random, and indeed are significantly associated with active changes in sanctions policy, it still may be helpful to confirm that regular shifts are not just a built-in function of the way states refer to foreign leaders. I therefore ran a similar data analysis process with the leaders of Germany, identifying the 1,103 times that the U.S. Government referred to a German Chancellor (Gerhard Schröder, Angela Merkel, or Olaf Scholz) from 2001-2024. The honorifics used for these leaders are remarkably consistent, especially compared with the volatility exhibited in the data for Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. Much like the U.S. relationship with Germany in general, which of course has some points of disagreement but which has remained steady over this period of time, the way the United States grants respect to Germany’s leaders is similarly consistent.

The Germany case therefore drives home a few important theoretical points illustrated

Figure 5.4: US Government Mentions of German Leaders

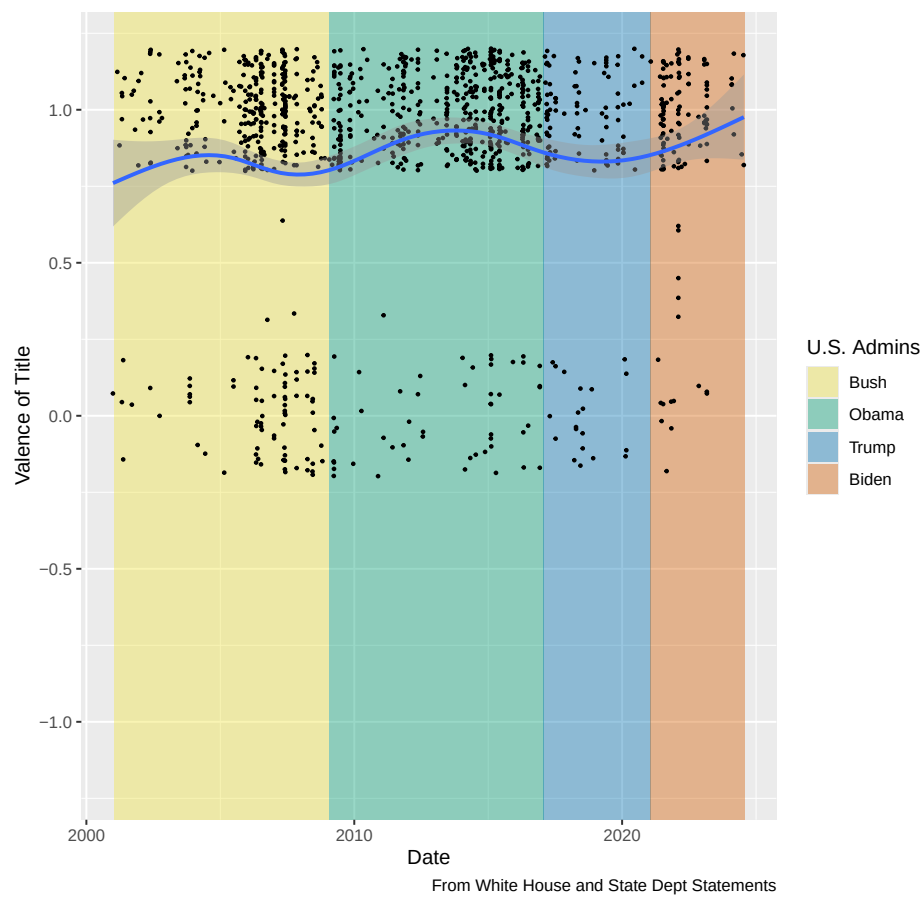


Table 5.8: Summary Statistics for Germany

Mean, Titles	SD, Titles
0.855	0.253

in this chapter. First, by comparing the German data with the data from the first four cases, it becomes clear how conventions of diplospeak can work to both continue the status quo when used consistently over time, while at the same time deviations from convention can serve as clear indicators of changing policy. It also confirms, through the remarkable lack of rhetorical changes over the period of 24 years, my assertions earlier that policy is driving rhetoric. Think again about the three potential alternative explanations I described above – that rhetoric is just arbitrary, that it is a reaction to world events, or that it is a reflection of a leader’s personal style. The extreme consistency of the way the United States referred to German leaders across more than two decades is not consistent with any of these three potential explanations. To summarize: in the Germany case, American policy did not significantly change, so American rhetoric did not either. In the other cases, policy shifted, and so did rhetoric.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined U.S. rhetoric towards the leaders of four countries with longstanding adversarial relations with Washington: Cuba, Iran, Syria, and North Korea, arguing that the honorific used for an adversary’s leader could be an early indication of a state’s policy. By bringing in work on language games and conventions, I argue that iterated interactions between actors over time can imbue certain words and phrases with mutually understood and agreed upon meanings within a given context. In other words, important information is conveyed in diplomatic language games; by learning the rules, diplomatic rhetoric can be a useful indicator of a state’s foreign policy. The U.S. government’s use of more negative titles therefore signals a shift towards a more hardline policy, while the use of the leader’s preferred title points towards a more open policy orientation.

In these cases, I found compelling evidence that changes in U.S. sanctions were often preceded by a shift in the title used for the leader of the state in question; the data clearly

indicate a pattern of diplomatic rhetoric linked to concrete changes in relations between the U.S. and at least three of its adversaries. Further, this phenomenon is not unique to any one leader. My data covers communication across four administrations and towards four different U.S. adversaries, still showing significant, consistent patterns. While I cannot gauge policy-makers' specific intentions in this chapter, these results serve as a clear indication that this type of diplospeak – words that convey respect – does indeed work to communicate meaning through the mechanism of linguistic conventions. As a reminder, I argued in Chapter 2 that linguistic conventions of diplospeak are what allow states to use rhetoric to meaningfully communicate with each other. If this is true, and if honorifics work as one of these conventions of diplospeak, we should see discernible patterns of title use – consistent when policy is consistent, and changing when policy is changing. This is indeed what the data shows. This chapter therefore serves as additional evidence for my theory.

In addition, this analysis has significant implications for both international relations scholars and policymakers, and can provide the basis for a wide variety of future projects examining diplomacy and rhetoric. For example, further studies could mobilize honorifics and other types of rhetoric with significant embedded relational meanings as a broader indicator of the state of relations between two countries, opening up possibilities for new inroads in the literature on how relative friendliness/tension between states impacts outcomes. On the policy side, the ability to anticipate shifts from other states early on by tracking changes in honorific use could prove invaluable, as could the addition of small, rhetorical shifts to the existing range of potential signaling mechanisms. Further study of both the intentionality behind and interpretation of these seemingly small word choices can help expand our understanding of how states communicate with one another, especially in the more quotidian moments that make up the vast majority of state interactions in international relations.

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5.7 Appendix

Table 5.1: Predictors of U.S. Sanctions Action (Robustness Checks)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Sanctions Action	Cumulative Sanctions	
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Respect Level (Interpolated)	0.029*** (0.003)		0.012 (0.012)
Respect Level		0.060*** (0.007)	
Iran	-0.323*** (0.013)	-2.699*** (0.074)	-3.546*** (0.058)
North Korea	-0.191*** (0.011)	-1.457*** (0.070)	-1.249*** (0.076)
Syria	-0.288*** (0.009)	-1.435*** (0.025)	-1.463*** (0.036)
Constant	0.257*** (0.008)	1.405*** (0.023)	1.425*** (0.034)
Observations	184,612	3,977	4,332
R ²	0.008	0.514	0.481
Adjusted R ²	0.008	0.514	0.480
Residual Std. Error	0.996 (df = 184607)	0.467 (df = 3972)	0.721 (df = 4327)
F Statistic	369.518*** (df = 4; 184607)	1,052.236*** (df = 4; 3972)	1,001.811*** (df = 4; 4327)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5.2: Predictors of U.S. Sanctions Action (Robustness Checks with Lags)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Sanctions Action	Cumulative Sanctions	
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t)	0.010** (0.005)		-0.288*** (0.022)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t-1)	0.018*** (0.004)		0.338*** (0.022)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t-2)	-0.013*** (0.004)		0.261*** (0.023)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t-3)	0.013*** (0.004)		-0.055** (0.022)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t-4)	0.010** (0.004)		-0.177*** (0.021)
Respect Level (t)		0.030*** (0.008)	
Respect Level (t-1)		0.025*** (0.009)	
Respect Level (t-2)		0.024*** (0.009)	
Respect Level (t-3)		0.023*** (0.009)	
Respect Level (t-4)		0.030*** (0.008)	
Iran	-0.328*** (0.014)	-2.711*** (0.079)	-2.814*** (0.061)
North Korea	-0.211*** (0.012)	-1.480*** (0.085)	-1.553*** (0.073)
Syria	-0.293*** (0.009)	-1.376*** (0.025)	-1.373*** (0.034)
Constant	0.263*** (0.009)	1.367*** (0.023)	1.360*** (0.031)
Observations	184,226	3,849	4,331
R ²	0.008	0.523	0.556
Adjusted R ²	0.008	0.522	0.555
Residual Std. Error	0.997 (df = 184217)	0.458 (df = 3840)	0.667 (df = 4322)
F Statistic	192.279*** (df = 8; 184217)	525.615*** (df = 8; 3840)	675.780*** (df = 8; 4322)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5.3: Predictors of U.S. Sanctions Action (Robustness Checks with MIDs)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Sanctions Action	Cumulative Sanctions	
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Respect Level (Interpolated)	0.036*** (0.003)		0.053*** (0.008)
Respect Level		0.027*** (0.004)	
MIDs Onset	0.055*** (0.003)	-0.118*** (0.012)	-0.056*** (0.022)
Iran	-0.319*** (0.017)	-3.751*** (0.096)	-2.901*** (0.052)
North Korea	-0.255*** (0.015)	-1.349*** (0.165)	-0.722*** (0.084)
Syria	-0.377*** (0.011)	-2.458*** (0.013)	-2.426*** (0.024)
Constant	0.332*** (0.010)	2.038*** (0.012)	2.046*** (0.023)
Observations	113,359	2,724	2,876
R ²	0.015	0.937	0.804
Adjusted R ²	0.015	0.937	0.804
Residual Std. Error	0.993 (df = 113353)	0.232 (df = 2718)	0.442 (df = 2870)
F Statistic	343.118*** (df = 5; 113353)	8,086.715*** (df = 5; 2718)	2,361.785*** (df = 5; 2870)
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table 5.4: Predictors of U.S. Sanctions Action (Robustness Checks with MIDs and Lags)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Sanctions Action (1)	Cumulative Sanctions (2)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t)	0.017*** (0.005)	−0.019 (0.017)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t-1)	0.025*** (0.005)	0.258*** (0.019)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t-2)	−0.017*** (0.005)	−0.232*** (0.022)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t-3)	−0.013*** (0.005)	−0.133*** (0.020)
Respect Level (Interpolated, t-4)	0.030*** (0.005)	0.180*** (0.018)
MID Onset (Interpolated, t)	0.062*** (0.012)	0.332*** (0.039)
MID Onset (Interpolated, t-1)	−0.008 (0.014)	−0.222*** (0.051)
MID Onset (Interpolated, t-2)	0.014 (0.014)	−0.039 (0.081)
MID Onset (Interpolated, t-3)	−0.016 (0.014)	−0.291*** (0.073)
MID Onset (Interpolated, t-4)	0.003 (0.012)	0.087** (0.040)
Iran	−0.375*** (0.019)	−2.974*** (0.052)
North Korea	−0.284*** (0.017)	−0.679*** (0.083)
Syria	−0.398*** (0.011)	−2.440*** (0.022)
Constant	0.355*** (0.011)	2.035*** (0.021)
Observations	112,973	2,875
R ²	0.015	0.835
Adjusted R ²	0.015	0.834
Residual Std. Error	0.994 (df = 112959)	0.407 (df = 2861)
F Statistic	136.801*** (df = 13; 112959)	1,114.119*** (df = 13; 2861)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

Diplospeak has a reputation. From the outside, it can seem vague and insincere, a way to weasel out of giving clear answers to tough questions, or even a way to twist or obscure the truth. Throughout this dissertation, however, I have shown that for those who speak it fluently, diplospeak has significant strategic advantages in facilitating communication between states. Through iterated interactions and coordination over meaning, diplomats are able to use conventions of diplospeak to reify the status quo. And, in moments of change, they are able to deliberately break established rhetorical expectations in order to send messages that are crystal clear – to those who speak their language.

At the same time, within the literature on international relations, particularly work on diplomacy, there is a small but growing appreciation for the way that seemingly insignificant individual choices by officials can aggregate into measurable foreign policy outcomes. In this dissertation, I contribute to this growing literature by showing how repetition and coordination among diplomats facilitates continuous meaningful communication between states. By using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze novel datasets of contemporary and archival state speech, as well as direct interviews with diplomats from the United States and South Korea, I was able to gain insights both on the individual and aggregate level to understand how linguistic decision-making happens within a state's foreign policy apparatus, and how these processes create, maintain, and, sometimes, shift policy rhetoric.

Below, I briefly summarize my findings before discussing both the scholarly and policy implications of this study. I conclude by previewing a future research agenda that will continue to flesh out when, how, and why diplomatic rhetoric can have impacts on the day-to-day

conduct of foreign policymaking.

6.2 Summary of Findings

My theory of diplospeak draws from two key theoretical traditions. First, I tap into the strong theoretical underpinnings on language and meaning within linguistic philosophy. Specifically, I share Wittgenstein's commitment to understanding language as a socially enacted "game" where the meaning of words and phrases are in their use by and between people. Different communicative contexts involve different linguistic "rules" and vocabularies that we as humans constantly navigate in order to interact smoothly with each other. In addition, drawing on the work of pioneering linguistic philosopher David Lewis, I conceptualize the vocabulary of diplospeak as a type of *linguistic convention*. For Lewis, conventions of language are what help people coordinate around shared meaning in order to help them navigate the many language games that they encounter on a daily basis. Linguistic conventions are coordination points that build expectations around shared meaning. In short, through iterated interactions and incentives to coordinate, two actors can come to communicate with each other *even without explicitly negotiating over the meaning of certain conventions*. Nor do the two actors need to necessarily share any underlying preferences other than for communication.

These assumptions make the concept of linguistic conventions particularly helpful in understanding whether and how states can meaningfully communicate with each other within an anarchic international system. Given the constraints and incentives of international anarchy, states may or may not be willing or able to explicitly negotiate over shared meaning, and they certainly do not share underlying preferences in most cases. In fact, depending on the policy issue, the underlying preferences of state actors may actually be in direct opposition to one another. However, Lewis' concept of communication by convention still allows these states to at least understand the messages they send to each other, even if they may or may not then act upon those messages in certain strategic ways.

To illustrate, think of two states that are sworn enemies, and therefore have no direct lines of communication with each other. How would State A indicate that they are interested in opening those lines of communication? What would State A say to both catch State B's attention amidst a flood of state rhetoric coming out of Ministries of Foreign Affairs every single day, and communicate a wish for détente in a way that State B will understand? According to my theory, State A can strategically shift established diplospeak conventions in order to convey such a message to State B. They could start using more formal and respectful language, for example, as in the case of Nixon opening up to China in the 1970s or Obama with Iran in the 2000s. Because expectations have been set that players in an adversarial language game will speak to each other in a disrespectful manner, using unexpectedly formal language can be a noticeable and meaningful way for State A to alert State B of an interest in shifting policy. In this way, diplospeak conventions can help both reify and shift understandings about foreign policy between two states,¹ just by strategically managing rhetorical expectations.

After first introducing these theoretical concepts from linguistic philosophy and how they influenced my theory of meaningful diplomatic communication through conventions of diplospeak, I then turn to a series of empirical tests of my theory. If I am right that it is specifically conventions that have built up within the vocabulary of diplospeak that allows states to meaningfully communicate with each other, there are two key observable implications. First, if word choice is indeed tied to a communication of policy intentions, we should see states take their words seriously to avoid miscommunication. However, if it is *diplospeak conventions* specifically that facilitate communication between states, we should see them taking some words more seriously than others. These words and phrases stand out

1. While this dissertation has not meaningfully engaged with how this communicative mechanism would play out in a multilateral context, there is no theoretical reason to believe that conventions of diplospeak do not work similarly regardless of the number of other states involved in an interaction. Future work can confirm this assumption, as well as exploring whether and how the different audiences of a diplomatic statement (both inside and outside the state apparatus) could impact how messages are sent and received.

amidst the firehose of state language, and additional meaning based on their continued use in iterated interactions between states. As discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, types of diplospeak include: 1) diplospeak that defines a relationship, such as the United States calling South Korea the “linchpin” of its alliances in Asia; 2) diplospeak that conveys respect, such as the use or withholding of formal honorifics; 3) diplospeak that shames others, such as one state condemning another for human rights violations; 4) diplospeak that maintains strategic ambiguity, such as the establishment of deliberately vague policies like the One China Policy; 5) diplospeak that invokes legal norms, such as using the specific, legally-defined term “genocide” to describe violence against civilians.

In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I first work to establish that states do, indeed, care deeply about their words, and, further, that there is significant variation in how much they care about different types of words. Through direct interviews with both American and South Korean diplomats, I establish that not only do they individually work to maintain a tight connection between words and policy, they also aggregate rhetoric internally within the bureaucracy through the clearance process. In order for a statement or document to be “cleared” for official use, it must go through a series of editorial checks throughout the bureaucracy that are specifically designed, in large part, to ensure that all wording properly adheres to established policy. As my interviewees discussed, their job was to reflect policy in their words, not to get ahead of it; in fact, the worst thing they could do would be to make news by deviating from established rhetoric and causing confusion. For receivers of these diplomatic messages, the process works much the same way. They build expectations around certain words and phrases, they know exactly where to look to keep track of policy – and how to recognize when those expectations have been broken. In short, the beginning of this chapter establishes how diplospeak conventions come to be established and maintained, and how listeners use this knowledge to help them interpret messages from other diplomats. In short, I show that not only do states take their words seriously, they do so *because they*

know their words create and maintain expectations around policy.

Next, I test the second implication of my theory, that the use of diplospeak conventions to convey policy means that some words will carry more weight than others. Using a novel dataset of guidances prepared by the State Department for use in their Daily Press Briefings for all of 2007 and 2008, I systematically show that the amount of bureaucratic effort expended to get the words “right” varies significantly depending on the topic of a document. Specifically, topics that are more important (close to US foreign policy priorities) and more at risk for miscommunication (less routinized and more conflict-prone), are associated with an increase in bureaucratic effort. In other words, states always work hard to ensure that their diplospeak accords with established conventions, but some conventions require more maintenance effort than others. By systematically showing through quantitative text analysis that the topic of a document is significantly correlated with the amount of care the State Department puts toward getting the words “right,” I provide evidence that states not only care about their words, but also that they care more about words when they carry additional communicative importance.

In the next two chapters, Chapters 4 and 5, I show how this process of communication through conventional use of diplomatic language plays out in practice using two specific types of diplospeak as examples. First, in Chapter 4, I explore how deliberate patterns of rhetorical reassurance and pressure characterized the US-South Korea relationship during the Reagan Administration. Following a period of volatility during the Carter Administration, particularly related to a potential draw-down or withdrawal of American troops from the Korean Peninsula, the Reagan Administration explicitly and purposefully used statements of reassurance to pull the relationship back to a state of routine. When the domestic political situation in Seoul became untenable, however, the Reagan Administration’s impatience with Chun Doo Hwan emerged through increasingly strong rhetorical warnings. Further, not only do archival materials from the American side make their intentions clear, contemporaneous

analyses from the Korean side also confirm that shifts in specific diplospeak conventions were both intended and taken as important rhetorical signals at the time. This chapter therefore adds depth and nuance to my study of diplospeak by showing in detail how these conventions operate within an allied relationship from the perspective of both the speaker and listener.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I apply my theory to a different type of relationship – diplospeak exchanged between adversaries. By exploring how the United States refers to four of its most consistent adversaries – Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria – over the period of two decades and four administrations, I am able to reveal broader patterns of word choice over time. In short, the evidence from this chapter shows that my qualitative evidence is not a fluke, or just related to allied relationships where communication is open. In contrast, it is possible to map changes in even the smallest, most symbolic word choice – honorifics – to patterns of policy between states that do not even have formal diplomatic relations with each other. In short, by combining the deep qualitative evidence of diplospeak at work within an alliance relationship in Chapter 4 with the broad quantitative evidence of diplospeak at work within an adversarial relationship in Chapter 5, I am able to confirm that my theory of how linguistic conventions facilitate meaningful communication between states holds in a broad range of situations in international relations.

6.3 Implications and Future Research

My theory of how states use conventions of diplospeak to communicate meaningfully with each other has implications for both the scholarly study of international relations as well as for those who study and make policy. As I discussed in the first two chapters of this dissertation, my theory draws on helpful insights from both rationalist and interpretivist traditions in IR, conceptualizing diplospeak as a strategic, instrumental tool that states wield that is nevertheless created and reified through social interactions. This therefore contributes to the tradition of those within IR studying language as a primary subject of

inquiry in its own right, including work on narratives, legitimation, and practices, as well as an increasing well of work that examines how the daily work of diplomacy facilitates the broader functioning of foreign policy.

At the same time, my theory and empirical evidence add to ongoing theoretical conversations on trust, credibility, and signaling between states. Rather than directly entering into the debate of whether and under what contexts states can glean useful information from the words of their counterparts, I help answer a logically prior question – how do diplomats, as agents of states, craft their messages in ways that are recognizable and understandable as signals in the first place? Indeed, before one can decide whether to trust a message, it must be recognized and understood on a baseline level in the first place. This dissertation therefore contributes to the conversation about communication between states by adding a linguistic element to our understanding of state-to-state messaging. Further work can then take up the mantle of whether and how this plays into assessments of credibility in international disputes.

Outside of the academic study of diplomacy, this dissertation can also bring insight for foreign policy practitioners. This includes both diplomats, who may themselves be fluent in the language of diplospeak, aspiring diplomats who are learning it, or even political appointees who are thrown into the deep end of diplomacy without necessarily knowing why their fellow officials speak the way they do. It may also help those within the policy sphere – but not necessarily in positions to use diplospeak themselves – better analyze and understand governmental language and the choices that these diplomats are making.

This dissertation forms the basis of a future research agenda that will continue to examine the use of language in shaping state-to-state interaction. For example, further work will assess the three types of diplospeak I was not able to cover here – namely, diplospeak that shames others, diplospeak that maintains strategic ambiguity, and diplospeak that invokes legal norms. A future examination of shaming behavior could dig deeper into how states

make a decision about whether to “condemn” the actions of another state, or merely express “regret” or “disappointment.” And, on the other side of the coin, how do recipients of shaming language react differently (if at all) to those different wording choices? This research agenda could continue to tap into work on the use of language in international relations, as well as literature on strategic shaming behavior. Future work on diplospeak that maintains strategic ambiguity could examine how a deliberate *lack* of specificity plays into the efficacy of coercive or deterrent signaling. Especially considering that one of the main goals of signaling could be to overcome information asymmetries between states, what would be the purpose of sending a signal that avoids commitment to a particular course of action? Finally, scholarship on legal terms could tap into work on international law and norm diffusion. What are the consequences of invoking (or choosing not to invoke) terms defined in international law like “refugee” or “genocide”? Do states actually feel obligated to take certain actions, if and only if they rhetorically acknowledge that a situation fits those legal definitions? Why do states sometimes avoid using those specific terms if there is not some sort of consequence?

In addition, this dissertation builds the base of a research agenda that can extend beyond just the realm of language. Communication is more than just our words; diplomats also communicate with their actions and even their inactions. In that sense, my theory of meaningful communication through diplospeak conventions may also extend to other types of communicative actions. Diplomacy is a profession that is highly formalized and full of all manner of symbolically important and socially constructed protocols that can send messages in a similar way through deliberate manipulation of expectations. Future work could build on my work with honorifics, for example, to see if the concepts of meaningful state-to-state communication through convention can extend to other sorts of symbolically important choices, such as granting and withholding of honors through state visits, display of flags, seating charts, and more.

Finally, additional work will continue to expand upon the work this dissertation has

done to conceptualize diplospeak as a mechanism for communication, and move into the realm of consequences for use (or misuse) of that mechanism. To give one example, a future project will examine diplomatic gaffes – conceptualized not just as mistakes but as failures to comply with established norms of diplomatic protocol – to see if and when these moments of miscommunication create downstream effects in foreign policy. If a mistake by an ambassador can indeed create friction in a bilateral relationship, delay or abort a negotiation, or even lead to a miscommunication during a crisis situation, this could be evidence that diplospeak is important not just as a mechanism for information exchange, but actually as an important variable in the conduct of international relations itself.

In short, this research agenda will significantly advance the field of international relations, which has only recently begun to take seriously the active role that diplomats play in the conduct of foreign policy. By focusing on the quotidian decisions that these diplomats make, including the words they use to communicate with each other and even the moments when they stumble, my work will therefore help us understand the importance of small, everyday decisions that make up the countless foreign policy interactions that take place in our international system every single day.

6.4 Conclusion

The terms often associated with the way diplomats speak – “euphemistic,” “placatory,” or even “Orwellian” – are hardly flattering. Although many might find governmental language bureaucratic or insincere, and may even question how critical it is to understand these types of small linguistic nuances within the broad field of international relations, my research shows there is an important reason diplomats speak this way. Through the vocabulary of diplospeak, diplomats are able to communicate with each other in ways that are precise, traceable over time, and still send messages even when countries are not technically on speaking terms with each other.

My research therefore challenges conventional wisdom, showing theoretically and empirically that diplospeak is actually an important strategic tool that states use to communicate with each other. I do this deliberately using a mixed-method approach in order to capture both the broad strokes of the linguistic landscape of state-to-state communication, while also taking advantage of the depth and nuance that comes with a qualitative study of a specific bilateral relationship during a contained time period. Through this approach, I build an analysis that combines evidence from several text datasets, multilingual archival documents, and primary source interviews with diplomats from both the United States and South Korea to illustrate how diplomacy facilitates the daily function of international relations. In this dissertation, I therefore show that diplomatic rhetoric is vital to the daily conduct of foreign policy, demonstrating that “diplospeak” is not just talk.