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A Comparative Study of Critical Discourse Analyses of First Speeches of Donald Trump and Mojtaba Khamenei After 2026 United States War with Iran

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Abstract

The study investigates the first public addresses delivered by American President Donald Trump and Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei following the U.S. Iran war. It offers a rich text for examining how political leaders construct legitimacy and national identity after an armed conflict. This study applies Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) to find out the ideological and discursive strategies employed in these two speeches. It investigates how each leader constructs polarization in form of an in-group/out-group contrast (Us vs. Them) and legitimizes military and political decisions. After analyzing both the speeches separately, the study gives a comparative analysis of them to identify the difference of strategies employed by both the leaders. The data was analyzed using descriptive qualitative method. The speeches were sourced from the official websites. Findings show both leaders represented positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation but divergent cognitive frames. Trump's discourse is inclined toward nationalist and deterrence narrative, while Khamenei's discourse leans towards religious-ideological resistance and martyrdom framing. The study contributes to comparative political discourse analysis illustrating how socio-cognitive structures shape leadership rhetoric in times of acute geopolitical crisis, offering insight into the discursive construction of power, conflict, and legitimacy across culturally distinct political systems.

Keywords: U.S. Iran War, Positive Self-presentation, Religious-ideological, Supreme Leader, Political Systems.

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Introduction

The United States and Iran have been entangled in conflict for a long time. It is primarily due to Iran's nuclear ambitions, which American leaders have staunchly viewed as a threat to global peace and security. All the U.S. leaders, including Donald Trump have urged Iran to abandon its nuclear aspirations successively, considering it essential for both regional and global stability

This U.S. and Iran conflict is related to politics but it is also depicted by language itself as language serves as more than a tool for communication. It is a means of yielding power and spreading public opinion. Therefore, in times of crisis, political leaders carefully select their words to justify their actions to both domestic and international audiences. It is exactly because of this specific usage of language that political speeches become an interesting object of analysis.

The two speeches discussed in this paper took place during the course of the 2026 US-Iran War. This war transformed the political situation globally. However, for many years before the conflict broke out, the tension between the two nations was expressed through proxy conflicts. In 2026, the hostility developed into actual warfare between the countries (BBC News, 2026). Following the outbreak of the conflict, the war progressed into a war of words as leaders from both sides sought to make statements justifying the conflict to the population and the world at large. The war commenced in February 2026 when U.S. and Israeli forces launched an attack, resulting in the death of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, along with several other members of his family. Mojtaba Khamenei succeeded his father as the new Supreme Leader (Wikipedia, 2026b). The first speech given by Mojtaba Khamenei was shortly after taking office. Since he had sustained serious injuries and had not been seen in public, his statement was broadcast on state television through the news anchors (India Today 2026). However, in his speech, he urged national unity, highlighted the resistance tradition of Iran, stated that the Strait of Hormuz will remain closed in order to exert pressure on its enemies and threatened the existence of U.S. military bases in the region if they do not withdraw (Wikipedia, 2026a; India Today, 2026). On the other hand, President Donald Trump addressed the country in his first major speech about the war on 28th February, 2026 which was just after its outbreak. He announced significant military and economic successes of America over Iran, argued that the country was "decimated" and claimed that all of the main war objectives were achieved. It is important to note that there was no outline of how to end the war in his speech and no mentioning of diplomatic possibilities (Time, 2026; Council on Foreign Relations, 2026).

This study has utilized Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how the two leaders employed language, tone, and rhetorical techniques to formulate their arguments, craft the narrative, and influence public opinion during national crises. It is a theory of language analysis that examines how discourse shapes, reinforces, or contradicts the power and inequalities in society (Fairclough & Wodak 1997). The texts in question can be written or spoken, like newspaper articles, speeches, or even common conversations. The key idea that forms the basis of CDA is that language is never neutral since all texts are socially determined and, in return, are influential in defining and shaping the social world, especially when promoting the domination of some groups over others based on race, gender, or class (van Dijk, 1993). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used for the exploration of deeper meanings and power relations present in the words of political leaders (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001a). The significance of this research lies in the fact that wars do not only require weapons; language also plays a crucial role. The study would reveal a diversity in the communication styles and choice of words of different leaders of Western states and religious regimes for the same conflict. They have used diverse methods of political persuasion, formation

of national identity, and spreading propaganda. Additionally, it would help students, journalists, and scholars gain a deeper understanding of the ideologies embedded in seemingly straightforward speech acts.

One of the dominant paradigms of CDA is the socio-cognitive paradigm introduced by Teun van Dijk which assumes that there are connections between discourse, cognition and society which are established through the "missing link" called human mind (Van Dijk, 2009). According to van Dijk (2001b), it is incorrect to assume that social structures such as power and inequality have any direct impact on language; they affect language indirectly through individuals' mental models and social cognition. Individuals use their personal experience reflected in their mental models and collectively accumulated social knowledge, attitudes and ideologies while producing language. Van Dijk (2008) thus suggests that the analysis of discourse should be done using a three-dimensional approach which includes the social (power structures and social relations), the cognitive (knowledge, beliefs and mental models), and the discursive (text and language), showing how ideologies are conveyed from society to text and vice versa.

Literature Review

1. Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis

Language is a great tool of communication. It is a dynamic and most effective way of expressing every type of emotion and feeling or a point of view. The public speakers use different lexical and rhetorical devices. There is always a hidden ideology behind their speeches. This is the reason why political speeches are a constant subject of interest for interpreters specially, discourse analyzers. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) studies how language is used to build, keep, or challenge power in society. It does not look for the surface meaning of words but dives deep to know what ideas, beliefs, and power relations are hidden inside a text. CDA is most widely used to analyze political speeches, because leaders employ different techniques in language not just to inform people but to persuade them, justify actions, and shape the ideology of people for various events such as war. The speakers assert that their next steps are fair and necessary. These speeches show how language and power work together in real political life.

2. Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach

Teun A. van Dijk is one of the pioneers of CDA. In his works, he has presented socio-cognitive approach which is different from other CDA models. In fact, it is because it adds a "middle step" between text and society namely 'the mind'. This middle step plays a significant role in exercising power. Van Dijk argues that there is no direct connection between discourse and power. Instead of this, speakers use mental models which are basically the personal memories of an event and social cognition which are shared group beliefs, values, and ideologies to shape their words. Then there are listeners who use the same kind of mental models to understand them (Van Dijk, 2008, 2014). In simple words, van Dijk's approach can be described in a way that society shapes the mind, the mind shapes text, and the text can then reshape society. This makes his model very suitable for analyzing war speeches, because leaders draw on shared national beliefs including patriotism, victimhood, religious duty, security etc. and try to plant new ideologies in the minds of listeners. Van Dijk himself notes that this framework is not a fixed method but a flexible one in which text, cognition, and society are connected. (Van Dijk, 2015).

Van Dijk (2001) argues that discourse, cognition, and society are in form of a 'triangle'. Discourse is the text or talk itself. Cognition means the mental models people carry in their minds, both personal memories of events (models) and shared social knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies

(social cognition). Society comprises the groups, institutions and situations of power relations in which the discourse takes place. According to van Dijk, powerful speakers exercise their power in discourse to shape the mental models of their audience, and this is how power and ideology get reproduced in everyday talk and text.

Van Dijk also introduced the idea of the 'ideological square'. This means that people who belong to a group tend to talk in a pattern that has four parts: focusing good things about their own group (us), focusing bad things about the other group (Them), neglecting bad things about their own group, and neglecting good things about the other group. This pattern of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation is one of the most important tools in his framework, and it is highly visible in political speeches, especially those made before or during a war.

Below is a summary of key concepts from van Dijk's framework.

Concept	Simple Meaning
Context Model	It is a mental picture of speaker about communicative situation: It addresses the questions like who is listening, why, where, and what the speaker wants to achieve.
Social Cognition	These are the shared beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies of a specific group which shapes how members understand events.
Ideological Square	A way of talk that presents positive self-presentation and negative other representation i.e. 'us' vs 'Them', while hiding 'Our' faults and 'Their' merits.
Macrostructures	The overall themes or main topics of the text, i.e. what the text is 'about' as a whole.
Local Meanings	This is the meaning of word and sentence itself, such as the choice of word, their examples, and related detail.
Rhetorical Structures	The devices used to persuade like repetition, hyperbole, metaphor, and contrast that make a message more convincing or memorable.
Argumentation	The arguments, reasons or evidences a speaker gives to justify a claim or a decision.
Power and Access	Who has the power to control the discourse make the events count as the 'truth'.

This framework has already been applied to a wide range of speeches and texts including political speeches about warfare, administrative and policy makers' communications and presidential and prime-ministerial addresses e.g. (Haryatmoko, 2017) applied it to Indonesian policy discourse. He examined how CDA had widely been used as a methodological framework between 2017-2024. He concluded that the model had widely been used to explore power imbalance, ideology, hegemony and gender.

3. Studies on Political and War-Related Discourse

Wartime and crisis discourse have been analyzed by using CDA. Researchers have shown that leaders commonly use strategies such as victimization (presenting their nation as attacked and innocent), heroism (presenting their own leadership as brave and decisive), and threat construction (presenting the enemy as dangerous) to win public support for war-related decisions.

There are several studies on American presidential rhetoric in which speeches by Donald Trump are also included. Most of these have found that Trump has presented himself as a leader who has strong decision power showing America as a peaceful state. He shows how concerned he is about the rights of Americans, portraying rival countries as oppressors and Americans as oppressed. This is evident in his speech through his use of emotional language and presentation of 'us' vs 'them' pattern. Kadim (2022), applying van Dijk's discourse strategies directly to Trump's campaign speeches, found that Trump consistently built a positive image of "US" (himself and the American majority) against a negative image of "THEM" (political opponents and immigrant groups). This style is often described as populist because it directly appeals to ordinary people to have a feeling of pride and faith in their state leaders. (Raza, Imran, & Shah, 2024).

Therefore, negative representation of immigrants in the news reports is usually intentional and is the result of negative representations held by the author's mind (van Dijk, 2006).

Lodhi et al. (2018) did a comparative study of linguistic features in the Inaugural speeches of American Presidents. They concluded that there are strikingly different linguistic features and rhetoric devices in the inaugural speeches of two presidents of United States.

Ivana and Suprayogi (2020) made a comparative discourse analysis of Donald Trump speech in which political strategy of United States is represented. According to this research, Donald Trump is very observant and has an acute knowledge of the world's political affairs more particularly about Iran. He considers himself as an exponent of peace. He expresses his desire to work all the nations together.

Zubair et al. (2026) argue that political discourse is a means of constructing reality and enhancing meanings to various interpretations. They used deconstructive analysis and came to the conclusion that political discourse has deeper significance rather than a superficial view. It has multiple layers of themes hidden in it that are implied meanings. So, meanings are never stable. The underlying conflict about U.S.-Iran crises is evident in the speech delineating the ideology of U.S. president.

The studies examining the political speeches of Iranian leaders are also remarkable in the field of CDA as Iran is a nuclear power in the whole Middle Eastern countries having a constant matter of attraction and interest all over the world. Thus, the speeches of Ayatollah Khamenei and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have been analyzed by different scholars. Most of the studies show the revolutionary stance with religious touches. The power of resistance and martyrdom are glorified in their speeches. They tried to make their nation realize that framing of conflicts with the West is a religious and moral obligation and is essential for securing their civilization. Mohd Don and May (2013) showed that the state media of Iran discursively linked Khamenei to the Prophet Muhammad and the Shia Imams, emphasizing the religious authority behind his political leadership. Basarati (2022) identified in his study that Khamenei's speeches present the "enemy" as a spatial and moral threat to the core values of Islamic Republic of Iran. There are also other works which highlight Israel and U.S. rhetoric in his addresses over different span of time. It highlights that Iranian leadership speeches have distinct ideological texture compared to Western political rhetoric.

4. Comparative CDA Studies

A comparative analysis of discourse from two different leaders or nations shows how different cultures and ideologies shape similar political events in different ways. Such comparative studies show that the goal is mostly shared representation of one's nation as 'good and positive' while the

hostile nation as ‘bad or negative’. But the difference lies in choice of linguistic and cultural devices as the values, history, and political systems of each nation are different.

Many comparative studies between Western and Iranian political discourse have found that Western leaders focus on nationalism and security, while Iranian leadership stress on religious legitimacy and resistance ideology. A directly relevant example is the comparative study of Iranian and U.S. presidential speeches at the United Nations, which examined the socio pragmatic functions of both countries' leadership discourse and confirmed this divergence in rhetorical strategy between the two political systems. These differences make van Dijk's socio-cognitive model especially valuable, since it can explain not just what is said, but why each leader's group holds those particular mental models in the first place.

Research Gap

Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework has long been used to examine political and war-related speeches, including analyses of ideology and power in campaign speeches (Kadim, 2022; Raza, Imran, & Shah, 2024) and inaugural rhetoric (Lodhi, Mansoor, Shahzad, Robab, & Zafar, 2018). Iranian political discourse has also used CDA to examine legitimacy and linguistic construction (Basarati, 2022), and a growing body of research has analyzed Trump's rhetoric on the US–Iran crisis specifically (Zubair, Yousaf, & Khan, 2026; Ivana & Suprayogi, 2020).

The research gap exists theoretically as the existing work on Iranian leadership discourse has relied on other CDA frameworks for instance, Mohd Don and May (2013) analyzed the discursive representation of Ali Khamenei in online media using Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor model leaving the mental-model and context-model dimensions unexamined as described in Van Dijk theory.

Second, methodologically, studies of US–Iran crisis have analyzed Trump's speeches in isolation (Zubair et al., 2026; Ivana & Suprayogi, 2020) or compared speeches drawn from unrelated conflicts and periods (Lodhi et al., 2018), rather than the discourse from both sides of the same conflict in similar time span. This leaves open how both leaders’ discourses legitimate the same war event in response.

Third, empirically, there is not a study that examines discourse produced after the 28 February 2026 US–Iran war and the new supreme leader Mojtaba Khamenei ‘s discourse to know about the discursive strategies to construct legitimacy in his first address (News Desk, 2026), compared to how the U.S. president discursively constructs the war's justification and outcome (Trump, 2026).

This study addresses these gaps by applying van Dijk's (2001, 2008, 2014, 2015) socio-cognitive approach to a closely paired dataset: Trump's first speech on the war and Mojtaba Khamenei's first address as Supreme Leader, both responding to the same conflict within a comparable timeframe. Thus, it generates new source of knowledge in two ways. Empirically, it produces the first paired US–Iran leadership dataset drawn from a shared war event, finding legitimization strategies and mental-model construction regarding same war event. Theoretically, it extends van Dijk's socio-cognitive model that was previously applied separately to Western political discourse (Kadim, 2022; Raza et al., 2024) and to Iranian leadership discourse (Mohd Don & May, 2013) using other frameworks, is now applied to a single comparative US–Iran design, testing how ideological square and context models operate across two structurally different political and religious systems responding to identical events.

Van Dijk's approach is chosen over other CDA frameworks because van Dijk's discourse–cognition–society triangle and ideological square (positive self-presentation/negative other-

presentation) are specifically designed to analyze how speakers shape mental models by using power and legitimacy giving the framework more direct bearing on ideology and legitimation under conditions of acute national crisis than alternative CDA models focused primarily on social-actor categorization or textual practice.

Research Questions

1. How do Donald Trump and Mojtaba Khamenei use their first post-war speeches to shape public opinion and justify their power?
2. What words, metaphors, and labels do both leaders use to praise their own country and attack the enemy?
3. How does Trump's casual language compare to Khamenei's religious language?

Research Objectives

- To analyze the first post-war speeches of Donald Trump and Mojtaba Khamenei using the critical discourse analysis.
- To identify the hidden ideologies in the selected discourse.
- To know the comparison between the discursive strategies of both the leaders.

Methodology

Research Design

The study has used descriptive qualitative method in which **qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** design has been adopted, applying Teun A. van Dijk's **socio-cognitive approach** to observe the first speeches delivered by American president Donald Trump and Iranian supreme leader Mojtaba Khamenei after the outburst of the 2026 U.S.–Iran war (initiated 28 February 2026 through the joint U.S.–Israeli campaign known as "Operation Epic Fury"). The socio-cognitive model is selected because it lays stress on the significance of mental models, social cognition, and context models between discourse patterns and broader socio-political structures of power. It is a well-suited design to analyze how leaders construct legitimacy, enmity, and national identity in their rhetoric related to war.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach which is based on a **triangular relationship**:

1. **The micro-structures:** The discourse which is a linguistic or textual level.
2. **The missing link:** The cognition which are the mental models, knowledge, and ideology behind the discourse.
3. **The macro-level structures:** These are the society-based structures of power and dominance generating inequality that discourse replicates or challenges.

Van Dijk's **ideological square** is used to examine how speakers construct:

- **Positive Self-Presentation** (In-group/Us)
- **Negative Other-Presentation** (Out-group/Them)

This is revealed through emphasizing our good things and their bad things, while de-emphasizing our bad things and their good things.

Corpus / Data

The corpus consists of the **first official speeches** delivered by relevant heads of state/officials in the immediate aftermath of the war's onset, for example:

President Donald Trump's address to the nation on the preliminary strikes,” *Remarks Announcing Major Combat Operations in Iran*” in Palm Beach, Florida Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, delivered on 28th February, 2026 and published on 1st April, 2026.

New Supreme leader of Iran Mojtaba Khamenei’s Statements after war, “Full text of Iran’s new supreme leader Mojtaba Khamenei’s first address” taken from the official website of Dawn News, News Desk, delivered on 13th March, 2026.

Analytical Framework — van Dijk's Levels of Analysis

The speeches will be analyzed across van Dijk's three interconnected levels:

1. Discourse Structures (Linguistic/Textual Analysis)

Macrostructure Focuses on overall thematic organization (topics, headlines, thematic sum-ups)

Superstructure Focuses on the schemes or narrative organization (justification, time line, conclusion)

Microstructure Focuses on the lexicalization, syntax, rhetorical devices, pronoun use (we/they), metaphor, hyperbole, presupposition, argumentation, local coherence

2. Social Cognition (Mental Models)

It investigates how speakers use the **context models** including communicative situation of speaker, audience, goals or setting and **event/situation models** including the mental representations of the war itself e.g., legitimizing military action as defensive and necessary framing the adversary as an existential threat.

3. Social Analysis (Societal/Political Context)

It is a process of linking discursive strategies to larger structures of **power, dominance, and geopolitical ideology** e.g., how speeches reshape nationalist ideology while delegitimizing the opposing state/regime.

Procedure

- 1. Transcription verification:** official transcripts of speeches have been cross checked for accuracy.
- 2. Close textual reading:** For identification of most recurrent lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical patterns, multiple readings have been done.
- 3. Coding:** Van Dijk's ideological square has been applied to identify discursive strategies like victimization, legitimacy, polarization, and hyperbole.
- 4. Cognitive interpretation:** Coded strategies are interpreted in context models and mental representations of the speakers/audience.

5. Socio-political contextualization: Power structures are checked e.g. U.S. hegemonic/populist discourse, Iranian resistance discourse.

Comparative synthesis: Discursive strategies in both speeches are compared to identify for convergences and divergences in framing war legitimacy.

Trustworthiness

- **Triangulation:** Primary transcripts' references are cross-checked for secondary analysis, in historical context.
- **Peer debriefing:** In order to enhance intercoder reliability, a second coder verified ideological square coding.
- **Reflexivity:** Researcher has acknowledged the sensitive nature of war discourse.

Ethical Considerations

Since the data is collected from publicly available political speeches, there is no need of any type of consent from anyone. In spite of this, the researcher has presented a critical discourse analysis instead of a political judgment on the legitimacy of the war itself. This is very helpful in maintaining the research neutral.

Data Analysis

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Trump's 'Remarks Announcing Major Combat Operations in Iran'

The socio-cognitive model is analyzed step by step as discussed in Literature Review Part.

Context Model of the Speech

Van Dijk explains that speakers build a “context model”. It is a mental picture of who they are speaking to, where, and why they are speaking before they speak, and this shapes almost every choice in the text. The table below sets out the context model of this speech.

Context Element	Description	Interpretation
Speaker	The speaker is Donald J. Trump, President of the United States, who is so the speech only has to defend the speaking with the full authority of the decision, not his right to make it. presidency and as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces.	
Setting	Palm Beach, Florida, on February 28, 2026, at the time when military operations his personal political brand with against Iran were being announced to the presidential authority. public.	
Audience	Multiple audiences: the American public, U.S. troops, the Iranian government and the people of Iran, and rest of the world. One speech does several jobs at once: declaring, encouraging, warning, and appealing for nations as a whole. different listeners.	
Communicative Goal	The purpose is the justification of a major military action, winning the public and troop support for it, a warning for Iran's	The speech mixes persuasion, justification, threat, and appeal into a single message.

	forces, and an encouragement for the Iranian public to rise against their government.
Genre	It is a formal political and military address, Mixing political and military delivered at a moment of national and language makes the action feel international importance. urgent and serious.

The text is divided into different sections to target each group separately e.g. justification of war part is for the American public and moral encouragement part is for U.S. troops. Moreover, it is a threat and an ultimatum for Iranian regime and its forces, and temptation to revolt for the Iranians. This multi-audience design is utilized because of Trump's secure position. As his legitimacy is already accepted, the speech does not need to build it. It is only to rally support for a decision already made.

Social Cognition: Shared Beliefs and Mental Models

Van Dijk's framework states that a speech is meaningful to an audience when it directly targets the shared beliefs of the society. This speech fulfils that already existed mental model in Americans about Iran as an ever-lasting enemy of the United States. The speaker does this by describing some past events including the hostage crisis in 1979, bombing at Beirut barracks incident in 1983, the USS Cole attack etc. linked to Iran. By listing this chain of events together, the speech compels the listeners to believe that Iran has always been the aggressor. And this war is just a way of responding. This is a central technique in van Dijk's approach, because the main purpose of speech or discourse is to get the existing social memory ready to make a new action. In this way the military strikes appear to be a natural and justified continuation of history rather than a new or risky choice.

The Ideological Square: Us vs. Them

The ideological square in Van Dijk framework is the most powerful and the clearest pattern in the current speech. Trump uses absolute language ('no military on Earth even close') rather than comparisons, so his claims cannot be checked, only accepted. The speech constantly ignores the negative aspects about the U.S. and anything positive about Iran's government. The table below gives clear examples from the speech, covering the four parts of the ideological square.

Ideological Square Element	Example from the Speech	Interpretation
Positive Presentation (Us)	The speech describes the U.S. military as having 'no military on Earth even close to its power, strength or sophistication'. The action of war is described as 'noble mission'.	Trump uses this proposition to describe the military in absolute terms making it trustworthy.
Negative Presentation (Them)	Iran's leaders are called 'a vicious Other-group of very hard, terrible people' and the regime is characterized 'the world's No. 1 state sponsor of terror'. it is a terrible regime.	Calling Iran's leaders 'vicious' removes any reasonable motive they might have. It reinforces his ideology about Iran that

Downplaying Faults	It is mentioned in the speech that 'we Trump calls casualties as 'sacrifice', may have casualties' but the impactshifting responsibility for the deaths of this statement is immediately away from the decision to strike. shifted by calling it a noble sacrifice rather than result of the decision to strike.
Downplaying Merits	There is no positive or neutral description of Iran's government or by praising ordinary Iranians while TheirIranian people anywhere in the condemning their government. speech; only the people who are still against the Iran's regime are said to be 'great'.

This pattern matters because the ideological square is one of the main ways speakers turn a political or military decision into something that feels moral and necessary.

Macrostructures: The Main Themes of the Speech

Van Dijk argues that every discourse is organized in form of 'macrostructures', or overall themes, that are chosen deliberately, not neutrally. The whole text may be understood by these structures. In the current speech, many different things have been discussed, but still, it is built around four connected main themes as discussed below.

Theme	What is said	Interpretation
Historical Threat	1983, barracks bombing in Beirut that killed 241 American military personnel, 2000, USS Cole attack and October 7 attacks on Israel slaughtering 1000 people.	By recalling all historical alleged Iranian attacks and aggressive strikes, he activates existing American security schemas as the past events make the war look like a natural response, not a new choice.
Nuclear Danger	'This terrorist regime can never have a nuclear weapon.' The main focus of the speaker is to prevent Iran from ever acquiring a nuclear weapon.	He Prevents Iran from ever having a nuclear weapon. It presents central justification of war action turning a long-term risk into an urgent emergency that leaves no time to debate.
Military Strength and Justice	"There is no military on earth even close to its power, strength or sophistication." "It is a noble mission."	Pairing power with morality reinforces that the war is right. He presents the U.S. military response to be very strong, controlled and morally right.
Liberation of Iran	"The great, proud people of Iran, I say tonight that the hour of your freedom is at hand."	He frames the war as a gift to Iranians, not an attack on them.

Iran has always been dangerous, the danger is now urgent, only strong and fair force can meet it, and that force will benefit Iranians. By the final theme, the war becomes justified.

Local Meanings: Word Choices and Detail

Word choice is significant because emotional language affects faster than facts. Listeners make judgment even before an argument is made. This speech uses two clear registers: harsh, violent words for Iran and noble, sacred words for the US.

Word or Phrase Used	Interpretation
'Vicious', 'terrible', 'wicked', 'radical dictatorship'	Harsh labels by Trump stigmatize Iranian leadership and replace evidence, allowing judgment without proof. He constructs the mental model of audience in which the label itself becomes proof without factual evidence.
'Obliterated', 'annihilate', 'raze to the ground'	Destructive and extremely forceful verbs by Trump consolidate US power and make them feel forceful and complete.
'Noble mission', 'selflessly risk their lives'	He uses sacred language about the war that reframes the cognition of US Army feel war like duty, not policy open to debate.
'Great, proud people of Iran'	The use of positive and respectful language for ordinary Iranians activates them to support the 'liberation' theme from their government.
'We pray', 'May God bless'	Religious language by Trump substantiate war as morally approved, above ordinary criticism.

Rhetorical Structures

Rhetorical devices matter here because Iran cannot respond within the speech as it is not a debate. The devices themselves must create certainty. Repetition reinforces the proof, hyperbole removes the need for comparison, and the direct addresses challenges the enemy.

Device	Example	Interpretation
Repetition	'They can never have a nuclear weapon' is repeated multiple times across the speech.	The repeated proposition by Trump strengthens mental model coding, signifies the message firmly in the listener's memory and enhances its certainty.
Hyperbole (Exaggeration)	'No military on Earth even close to its power' and 'mass terror' are strong, extreme claims.	Extreme claims by the president amplifies emotional impact in listeners which make them feel certain because there's nothing in the speech to compare them against.
Metaphor	'Soaked the earth with blood and guts' uses vivid, bodily imagery to describe violence.	The use of metaphors makes violence shocking and emotionally close to the listener. It shapes mental models and activates shared social representations, reinforce ideological polarization.

Direct Address Ultimatum	'So, lay down your arms. You /will be treated fairly with total immunity, or you will face certain death.'	The direct address challenges the enemy that they have to suffer a lot if they do not lay down. It also makes the message important and urgent.
Contrast	The use of destructive language for Iran's regime against the prayerful language for U.S. troops.	It creates a gap between the two sides, reinforcing the Us vs. Them divide.

Argumentation Strategies

In van Dijk's framework, any reason and justification a speaker gives to justify a claim or a decision is said to be argumentation. Argumentation here relies on past events (the embassy takeover, the Beirut bombing, the USS Cole, attacks in Iraq, the October 7 attacks) which are used as evidence that Iran is a permanent and growing threat. This is a common argumentation strategy called 'argument from historical precedent': when a past event is used to justify present or future action, without trying to prove it with a new reason. The speech also uses a 'worst-case scenario' argument which refers how public minds can be controlled by intentionally omitting a marginalized group or its point of view. In the present speech, it is used by asking the audience to 'imagine how emboldened this regime would be' if it had nuclear weapons. This forces the audience to accept the action as necessary prevention rather than aggression.

Power, Access, and Control of Discourse

A key part of van Dijk's approach is about the person who controls the discourse. In this speech, Trump uses power of presidency and addresses multiple national and international audiences directly without bothering about the response or challenge from the other side. This is called one-directional structure. Iran's government and people receive the message but cannot answer back within the same discourse event. Van Dijk argues that this kind of unequal access to public discourse is itself a form of social power. It can only be used by those specific speakers who hold institutional power.

Conclusion

Using van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, this analysis shows that the speech is built through the constant interaction of text, mind, and society. The context model shapes the structure of speech for multiple audiences. This new military action is justified by shared social memory of past events. The ideological square divides U.S and Iran into a virtuous 'Us' and a dangerous 'Them'. Word choices, rhetorical devices, and argument structures build emotional certainty rather than open debate. Finally, having absolute power to speak and be heard shows how political discourse is used to exercise social and institutional power.

Critical Discourse Analysis of Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei's First Address

Context model of the speech

Context Element	Description	Interpretation
Speaker	Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, newly appointed Supreme Leader of Iran	Unlike Trump, Khamenei must prove his authority while also using it.
Setting	Statement read on state television (not a live speech)	A recorded broadcast avoids risk at a moment when his authority is still forming.
Timing	Shortly after the death ("martyrdom") of the previous Supreme Leader and during an active war	Grief, succession, and war are compressed into one narrow, emotional moment.
Audience(s)	The Iranian nation, fighters, victims' families, regional government leaders, and religious/political supporters	Addressing several groups together builds one united, loyal audience.
Institutional Power	Speaking from the highest position of religious and political authority in Iran	Religious authority is harder to challenge domestically than a purely political claim.
Historical Backdrop	Succession from the previous Khamenei to new supreme leader; ongoing conflict with the U.S. and reference to the "Strait of Hormuz"	Linking to past leadership borrows stability for a new, untested leader.

In this first speech of a newly appointed leader, he must build legitimacy to prove that he deserves the position. This is why the speech cannot separate its audiences the way Trump's does; he must prove he deserves the role while also mourning, warning, and uniting the same listeners at once.

Social Cognition: Shared Beliefs and Mental Models

Van Dijk argues speakers stir two types of mental representations in the audience:

- Personal mental models are of specific events e.g., "my family's loss"
- Social representations are the shared group knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies e.g., what it means to be Iranian, what Islam teaches about martyrdom, etc.

Type	Example from Speech	Interpretation
Personal/event model	"I've entrusted my loyal wife... to the caravan of martyrs"	Sharing personal loss earns him the right to speak for the nation's grief, presenting evidence that he too suffers like others.
Social representation (religious knowledge)	Opening invocations to Imam Mehdi	Religious language confirms authority that doesn't need to be argued for. It makes the audience feel that the leader is spiritually connected.
Social representation (national identity)	"The great Iranian nation," references to shared borders with 15 countries	Shared nationhood reinforces 'obey the new leader'. It activates a sense of collective national identity and geopolitical awareness
Ideological representation	"Islamic values," Revolution's "Resistance Front"	War is linked to Islamic Revolution, not personal choice. It reinforces political ideology by connecting the current war to revolutionary goals.

Here Khamenei links his personal loss to the nation's shared suffering. He describes it in shared experience without separate argument. This thing strengthens his legitimacy.

The Ideological Square: Us vs. Them

One of van Dijk's key tools is the ideological square. It is about how speakers present their own group positively and the opposing group negatively.

Category	“Us” (Iran Resistance Front)	/ “Them” (US / enemy / Israel)	Interpretation	
Labels used	"Great nation," "brave fighters," "sacrificing Hezbollah," "faithful Yemen"	Iranian "brave self-aiding faithful"	"Front of Arrogance," "the enemy," "Zionist sedition," "aggressors"	By these warm labels, Khamenei strengthens solidarity of allied groups while glorifying his own nation and forces.
Actions described	Defending, sacrificing, aiding others, mourning with dignity	Attacking unjustly, lying, dominating, committing crimes	Verb choice assigns blame before any facts are given e.g. allies ‘defend,’ enemies ‘attack.’ It legitimizes own actions while demonizing others.	
Moral framing	Patient, righteous, willing to forgive but firm	Deceptive ("claims... have been nothing but	Justifying his side as patient and righteous reframes ongoing conflict as restraint, not	

		lies"), aggressive, aggression. It underscores the blameworthy distinction between “us” and “them”.	
Emotional tone	Warmth, gratitude, grief, pride	Anger, distrust, threat	Positive feelings for ‘us’ and negative feelings for ‘them’ work on emotion, not argument. It perpetuates an ideological division between two groups.

This feature of discourse does not simply describe reality. It is a discourse strategy that helps to unite the in-group audience and justify war of revenge.

Macrostructures: The Main Themes of the Speech

Van Dijk is of the view that every long text or discourse has a macrostructure. There are some main topics that organize all the small details. The current speech is divided into different parts which makes the macrostructure easy to understand.

Part	Stated Topic	Interpretation
Opening	Religious invocation & condolences	Starting with sacred language frames everything after it as spiritually approved. It sustains dominant ideological beliefs.
1 st	His position as a new leader	He presents himself as a leader elected by a process (Assembly of Experts), not self-appointed. It legitimizes his current position.
2 nd	Appreciations and encouragement for fighters	Praising the military/"Resistance Front" right after claiming legitimacy ties his authority to their loyalty, solidifying power relations.
3 rd	Message to families who suffered loss, damage or injury	He shows empathy by sharing his own personal losses. This makes the coming warnings feel protective, not aggressive.
4 th	Message to the leaders of Middle Eastern countries	He warns them to remove U.S. military bases. It activates emotional bonding to consider it as defense, not aggression.
5 th	Homage to the previous (martyred) leader	Paying tribute to old leader's mission and promising to continue his mission transfers his legitimacy to the new leader.
6 th	Thanks to supporters and officials	He consolidates political sustenance by publicly thanking the supporters and officials.

Closing	Religious prayer for victory	Ending in prayer returns his speech to a sacred unifying note not political, register.
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The speech is performing many functions at a time. It is a funeral eulogy, a coronation speech, and a war statement. This is intentional as the speech is made at such a significant time in the history of Iran that he must do many things at the same time.

Local Meanings: Word Choices and Their Hidden Power

Van Dijk says that choice of words in discourse is very significant. It is not meaningless or mere accidental. Speakers choose the words that carry judgment.

Word/phrase Used	Type	Interpretation
"Front of Arrogance"	Dysphemism (negative label)	He calls U.S.-led alliance into a morally arrogant enemy, not just a rival, amplifying their enmity as endless.
"Zionist sedition"	Dysphemism	He frames Israel's existence/actions as illegitimate rebellion, not a state in reality, justifying the removal of negotiating with it.
"Martyrdom," "martyred leader"	Religious reframing	He attributes death in war as a sacred, honorable act, normalizing particular ideological perspectives.
"Avenge," "revenge"	Repeated keyword	He sets a public vow of revenge and builds moral obligation on leadership. This makes any later restraint look like betrayal.
"Meagre self," "your servant"	Self-humbling language	He builds legitimacy by presenting himself modest. This strategy contrasts with "power grab" framing.
"Resistance Front"	Euphemism/group identity term	He gives allied armed groups (Hezbollah, Houthis, Iraqi militias) a positive and unified identity, making separate armed groups look like a unified bloc.

Khamenei repeatedly uses humble language while claiming supreme authority. This thing protects his position against calling him having seized power.

Rhetorical Devices Used in the Speech

Rhetorical Device	Example from the Speech	Interpretation
Anaphora (repetition opening phrase)	There are seven consecutive of lines that begin with “Peace be upon you...”	Repeating a sacred phrase asks the audience to feel his legitimacy before judging his claims and places the speaker within a sacred lineage.
Direct address Apostrophe	/“O leader!”, “O my master, the master of the Time”	It intensifies emotional and spiritual solidarity with the audience, elevating the speech above ordinary political address.
Metaphor	“a mountain of strength”; “radiant jewel”; “caravan of martyrs”; “manifold veils and covers fall away”	It describes the glory of late leader and maintains ideology in vivid imagery, giving the new leader an air of permanence.
Hyperbole	“Crushing blows”; “dispelled their illusion of them being able to... disintegrate our beloved homeland”	It intensifies the strength of nation and weakness of the enemy, reinforcing collective confidence.
Repetition (near- verbatim)	“I assure everyone that we shall not forgo the avenging of the blood of your martyrs” / “I assure everyone that we won't forgo avenging the blood of your martyrs”	The repetition of vows describes a forceful promise of revenge as a non-negotiable commitment.
Presupposition	“The U.S.'s claims of ensuring security and peace have been nothing but lies”	It presents U.S.'s claim of security as nothing based on shared knowledge and already agreed fact.
Appeal to ethos (shared suffering)	“I've entrusted my loyal wife, my self-sacrificing sister... to the caravan of martyrs”	Establishes credibility and relatability by claiming personal sacrifice equal to that of ordinary citizens.
Appeal to pathos	References to grief, injured children, families of martyrs, and injustice, making retaliation feel morally destroyed homes	It activates emotional mental models of loss and inevitability.
Conditional threat structure	“Should they refuse, we shall seize... and if that is not possible, we shall destroy an equivalent amount of their assets”	Escalating tricolon structure signals resolve and inevitability of retaliation, reinforcing power and deterrence.
Rule of three Tricolon	/ “Dignity and well-being,” listed alongside victory and elevated status for the dead	A rhythmic closing ties his authority to religious form, not just politics.

Legitimation Strategies

Van Dijk's approach explains how speakers use power to legitimize authority through discourse. They show their actions and authority as natural.

Strategy	Example	Interpretation
Authorization	He mentions the Khamenei's as the Assembly of Experts.	He shows that the position is inherited through legitimate political process.
Moral evaluation	He frames revenge as fair and just, making it as a need of time.	He makes action of revenge look morally acceptable.
Rationalization	He says "the leverage of closing the Strait of Hormuz must... continue"	He presents a military action as a logical and necessary response, making it look routine, not a new decision.
Mythopoesis (storytelling)	He narrates the story of clenched fist of previous leader after martyrdom.	Telling the old leader's story lets the new leader inherit his virtues by association.
Emotional appeal (pathos)	He shows grief for his family members and sympathy for the wounded.	It builds emotional trust before making political demands.

Khamenei's legitimation is based on theology which follows from Iran's political system.

Power, Dominance, and Access to Discourse

Van Dijk's model shows a link between discourse and power. The person who has the power to speak matters a lot. Then the effect of his words also important. In the current speech, the Speaker has exclusive access to state television which is the most powerful public platform in Iran. Ordinary citizens or members of opposition party do not have such an access. The speech exercises some sort of dominance over other nations by instructing regional governments to shut down U.S. bases. It is an act of political persuasion with implied consequences. The repetition of religious invocation at the very start shows that his authority is not just political, but sacred and unquestionable.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that the speech is performing different functions. It proves he deserves to be the new leader as he is humble, religious, and personally suffering like the people. It builds unity between Iran and its allies "Resistance Front" using warm, positive language. It paints a strong picture of the enemy as dishonest and aggressive, to justify continued war and revenge. Moreover, it comforts and connects emotionally with grieving families, showing that the leader is relatable. It also uses religious and historical authority so that his position may not be questioned.

Comparative Analysis of both speeches

Both speeches are analyzed using van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework across the same five categories: context model, macrostructure, ideological square, local meanings/legitimation, and power/access. It examines whether a particular category works the same way for different speakers or not. The table below compares the two.

Analytical Category	Why Trump Used This Strategy	Why Khamenei Used This Strategy	Difference in Impact
Context Model & Communicative Purpose	He speaks from a secure institutional position as a president and Commander-in-Chief. His goal is to justify a strike, rally troops and the public, threaten the regime, and invite the Iranian public to revolt. It is a decision justification model built on power.	He speaks from a comparatively vulnerable position as he is newly appointed and addressing the nation for the first time after his predecessor's death during war. His goal is to prove that he deserves the position while simultaneously performing act of mourning, uniting, and threatening the enemy. It is a legitimacy construction model built on vulnerability.	Trump's speech looks outward to influence broader political perceptions because his legitimacy is assumed. Khamenei's looks inward because his legitimacy must still be built among his audience.
Macrostructure & Audience Design	It is an audience segmented speech. Different sections address the American public, U.S. troops, Iran's regime, and the Iranian people separately. It is mainly because the audience is not particularly related to one another.	It is a fusion of different genres including funeral eulogy, coronation speech, and war statement. It is because his legitimacy, mourning, and threat must be established together for the same audience.	Trump splits his message to reach more audiences while Khamenei fuses his to build more trust with one audience.
The Ideological Square	The address is to justify a decision already taken to a public that largely already supports the speaker. It is a self-praise ('noble mission') and enemy-vilification ('vicious...terrible') that	It is used to actively construct support of audience. The self/enemy contrast ('Resistance Front' vs. 'Front of Arrogance') help in creating in-group solidarity and	The same strategy consolidates support for Trump and builds new support for Khamenei.

	convert a policy choice into a moral inevitability.	support the leader and the conflict.	
Local Meanings, Legitimation & Rhetorical Devices	He legitimizes U.S. action by quoting historical events (1979 hostage crisis, Beirut bombing, USS Cole, October 7) and by expressing military capability using destructive verbs for the enemy.	He legitimizes theologically through the Assembly of Experts and religious lineage. He uses self-humbling language ('meagre self') to avoid feeling a power-grab and mythopoesis (the predecessor's final gesture) to inherit legitimacy by association.	Trump defends a decision using history; Khamenei defends his right to rule using religion.
Power, Access & Control of Discourse	His institutional power is already settled as he has an elected office and speaking through multi-channel Western media. He can speak about his adversary without being immediately challenged by the opponent but other media can still question it.	His institutional power is asserted through exclusive state-television access in a more centralized media environment. His powerful political orders make him appear established, legitimate, and powerful though he is a new leader whose authority is still being established.	Trump has to persuade an audience in a competitive media while Khamenei can exercise narrative control as his speech is presented by the only available account.

Trump's speech is audience-segmented where separate sections are for the public, troops, Iran's regime, and Iran's people. Khamenei's is genre-fused where eulogy, coronation, and war statement combined into one address, because his legitimacy, mourning, and threats all rest on the same unproven claim. Both aim to reach a mixed audience, but one splits the message while the other combines it.

Both speeches use harsh language for the enemy and almost sacred language for their own side but their legitimation differs. Trump relies on historical precedent and military strength, while Khamenei relies on religious authority, humble language, and a symbolic link to his predecessor. Despite these differences, both speeches ultimately construct power through discourse: Trump from an already established position, Khamenei from a newly claimed one.

Discussion

The above discussed comparative findings show that both the leaders draw on the same theoretical mechanisms comprising context model, macrostructure, ideological square, local meanings, legitimation, and power/access. But they have structurally opposite objectives because their positions within the power hierarchy differ. Trump speaks in a way which shows he has an already secure office. He uses every device to consolidate support for a decision already made. Khamenei

speaks in a manner that shows he has an unsettled office and he uses the same devices to construct the legitimacy. This asymmetry is the paper's central analytical finding, and it directly answers the first research question. Both leaders shape public opinion and justify their power by aligning van Dijk's three levels of discourse, cognition, and society in the same direction.

The second research question is about the words, metaphors, and labels each leader uses to praise his own side and attack the enemy. So, the analysis shows convergence in strategy type and divergence in vocabulary register. Both speeches use almost identical ideological square i.e. positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation which suggests this pattern is not a culturally specific rhetorical device but a structural requirement of any wartime discourse. The difference is in the usage of register each leader draws. Vocabulary from Trump's positive self-presentation is secular and based on capability ('no military on Earth even close'), while Khamenei's is theological and based on sacrifice. ('caravan of martyrs'). Each side dehumanizes the enemy through a different register using criminal moral terms for Trump ('vicious,' 'terrible'), and doctrinal political terms for Khamenei ('Front of Arrogance,' 'Zionist sedition'). The underlying ideological function is identical but the cultural resource each speaker draws on to perform it is not.

The third research question about comparing Trump's casual register to Khamenei's religious register, is best answered not as a difference of personal style but as a difference of available legitimization resource. Trump uses more informal and direct register (short declaratives, blunt ultimatums) because his legitimacy to speak is not in question and he carries the authority. Khamenei cannot take the same risk. So, he uses sustained religious register (invocation, self-humbling address, appeals to Imam Mehdi) because it is the only source of authority a newly appointed can draw on. Register is itself a legitimization strategy which is chosen in proportion to how much legitimization the speaker still needs to do.

These findings extend the research gap identified earlier in this study. Prior work has largely analyzed Trump's wartime rhetoric in isolation (Zubair et al., 2026; Ivana & Suprayogi, 2020; Kadim, 2022) or examined Iranian leadership discourse through frameworks other than van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (Mohd Don & May, 2013). The study has made a pairing of Western head of state with a newly appointed, religious political leader confronting the same conflict and with the same theoretical framework. It shows that van Dijk's model is sensitive not primarily to culture but to power position. This is arguably a more precise use of the socio-cognitive approach as compared than 'Western' and 'Middle Eastern' discourse as inherently different traditions. It locates the source of difference in the speaker's position rather than in an assumed cultural style.

Several limitations are there in these findings. First, the analysis is based on a single speech from each leader. A single address cannot capture how either leader's discursive strategy might change during the conflict. Second, Khamenei's address was analyzed through its official English translation rather than the Persian original, and translation inevitably intermediates some of the connotative and register level meaning that CDA considers. Third, this is a text centered, synchronic analysis. It identifies the strategies encoded in the speeches themselves but does not measure how domestic or international audiences actually received or interpreted them. These limitations do not undermine the comparative pattern identified here. But they mean the findings should be read as an analysis of discursive strategy rather than its effect.

Taken together, the discussion suggests that it is a modest but useful theoretical refinement to comparative CDA of wartime leadership discourse. When comparing wartime leaders' speeches

using van Dijk's approach, political security is the main motive of how language is used rather than national culture.

Conflict of Interest

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