

# Analysis of Proximization in Russia Public Discourse -- A Case Study of President Putin's speech on the Russia-Ukrainian conflict

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**Abstract:** Based on President Putin's over 10,000—words speech on the Russia-Ukraine conflict which was delivered on February 21, 2022, this study analyzes the construction of legitimacy in Russia public discourse from the perspective of Proximization Theory. The results of the present study are as follows. First, Putin used spatial proximization to identify the elements of the deictic of the DS(IDC) and the elements outside the deictic center of the DS(ODCs) to highlight the process and influence of proximization of ODCs to IDCs in order to create fear among the audience and to prove the legalization of military operations. Second, in terms of temporal proximization, he used lots of the past simple tenses and present perfect tenses to generate contrasting discourse so as to construct threats from past events to the future, as well as the use of modal verb phrases to build the continuous influence of ODCs on the present and the future to reflect the urgency of the current situation. Finally, in light of axiological proximization, it underlined Russia's positive values in response to external threats, contrasting with the antitheses' negative values. The defense of national interests and the necessity of the waging war were emphasized. The present study provides insights into the application of Proximization Theory in Russian-Ukrainian discourse, as well as the characteristics of Russian political language styles.

**Keywords:** Proximization Theory; Russia; Ukraine; Political discourse; legitimacy.

## 1. Introduction

Language and ideology are extremely closely related, and different languages can reflect different ideologies. The relationship between the two is particularly evident in political discourse. Speakers use various discourse strategies to disseminate their ideology and to legitimize their decisions, actions, and so on. Critical discourse analysis (CDA, henceforth), as one of the most important perspectives in the study of political discourse, is to analyze the ideologies embedded in the discourse through different theories. In recent years, many studies have been conducted to analyze critical discourse by applying theories such as Halliday's (2000) Systemic Functional Grammar, Fairclough's (1992) Three-dimensional Model, the Discourse-historical approach of Wodak (2001) and so on. However, currently, the Spatial-Temporal-Axiological (STA, henceforth) model of the Proximization Theory (PT, henceforth) (Cap, 2006) is increasingly applied in critical discourse analysis. (e.g., Cap, 2008; Wu & Niu, 2018; Zhang & Zhang, 2018; Yan & Zhang, 2018).

Since February 24, 2022, Russia has decided to launch a special military action against Ukraine. The conflict between these two countries started immediately and has been going on for more than a month. On February 21, 2022, before the action, President Putin made an over 10,000-word speech describing Russian-Ukrainian relations in aspects of history, current situation, reasons for Russian actions. At present, the number of the studies focusing on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is limited. Therefore, this paper employs the STA model of PT to analyze Russian president Putin's speech on the eve of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict so as to analyze how it legitimizes Russian military action against Ukraine. Besides, this study also provides suggestions for future research directions so as to expand the research horizon of Russian-Ukrainian discourse and adds references to analyze the political language.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The theoretical framework of PT

Proximization Theory refers to the projection of the elements outside the deictic center of the deictic space (DS, henceforth) in time and space to the physical and psychological distance of the speakers and the listeners so that both sides can feel the proximization process and its effects. By contrasting the positive and negative values of the both sides, their standpoints, opinions and the legitimacy of the actions are just justified. (Cap, 2006). This theory, which was proposed by Cap and most commonly applied in critical discourse analysis, is a cognitive discourse model. Based on Chilton's (2004) theory of spatial proximization, Cap (2006) further constructed a new STA model of proximization analysis, which is a kind of discourse analysis from three dimensions: space, time and axiology.

Proximization Theory includes three aspects: spatial proximization, temporal proximization, and axiological proximization. Spatial proximization theory refers to the gradual physical intrusion of ODCs into the IDCs (such as speakers and listeners) in the discourse space. Temporal proximization theory refers to the envisioned conflicts or contradictions are imminent and their impacts are so enormous that an immediate response is urgently needed. Its temporal proximization is not only reflected in the impact of past events on the present which is the proximization of the past to the present, but also in the fact that the impact will continue into the future which can be explained by the proximization of the future to the present. Spatial proximization and temporal proximization often use analogies to confuse a growing threat in the present with an actual catastrophic event happening in the past, in order to illustrate the urgency of the current situation and create anxiety and fear of the hearer. Axiological proximization refers to the conflict between the positive values of the IDCs and the negative values of the ODCs. It mainly achieves the purpose of discourse by comparing the positive and negative values of the both sides.

### 2.2 The empirical studies of the application of PT

Nowadays, the STA model of Proximization Theory is frequently used by relevant scholars to interpret discourse strategies in different types of texts, including the fields of politics, ecology, public health discourse and so on. The previous studies on the application of PT focused on the monolingual investigation and contrastive studies by comparing the ideologies of different political power.

As far as the monolingual investigations are concerned, the most general study concentrated on political discourse and public discourse. For example, Ji (2021) selected the white paper (English version) of China's official document "Fighting *Covid-19* China in Action" as the research data, to explore the overall use and distribution characteristics of the proximization theory in public health discourse with the characteristics of political discourse. It is found that all three dimensions of proximization theory, that is, space, time and axiology, can be found in the dataset. And it clarifies the characteristics of spatial and axiological proximization, supplemented by temporal proximization. In terms of the spatial proximization, it is realized by enhancing the understanding of the IDCs and neutralizing threats from the ODCs. Regarding the temporal dimension, discourse pays more attention to completing the proximization from the future to the present so as to defend against potential future risks. Concerning the axiological dimension, it emphasizes the positive value of the IDCs (Chinese government) and shapes a positive image. Besides, Song & Liu (2019) took *National Security Strategy of The United States of America* which was published in 2007 as an example to analyze how speakers manipulate language with premeditation through proximization theory to achieve goals and legitimize laws and policies. The research results indicate that that Trump has repeatedly employed the three dimensions of Proximization theory in *National Security Strategy of The United States of America* so that he established United States with the image of a passive, peace-loving, and responsible, thereby making the possible subsequent military actions legitimate. Apart from the political area, proximization theory was also employed in the field of college education. For instance, Sun (2018) chose a paragraph of college English classroom language in order to analyze the discourse

system of English classrooms in colleges from the proximization theory. This study further explored the way how teachers construct discourse space, apply discourse strategies, shape and enhance language images, and promote classroom discourse to achieve social cognition. Based on a dialogue happening in the English class, it is found that the past tense was mainly used at the dimension of temporal proximization. For example, the case that Tim achieved excellent grades in the past can leave a continuous impact on the present and future of the other students. The direct impact on the rest of the students is to reflect and evaluate their values possible development, and take certain actions to realize it. In the next semester, the selections of elective courses can demonstrate that Tim does have a subtle influence on the classmates. At the level of spatial proximization, Tim caused an invisible pressure on the hearers. They needed to take actions to reduce the gap to achieve future spatial proximization. At the level of axiological proximization, the hearers formed a conscious evaluation of themselves and found out differences between their values and Tim's, so as to realize that in the next semester, they need to take actions to shorten the gap and achieve axiological proximization.

In summary, the previous studies focusing on the application of PT in monolingual context analyze the words and the intended meaning of the utterances to further find out how the speakers achieve their purposes with the proximization theory embedding in their speeches and the possible effects that the context may cause.

In addition, quite a few scholars chose to compare different political stands by applying the Proximization Theory, most of which were the comparison of Chinese and foreign media reports. For example, Zhang and Zhang (2018) conducted a case study of the 2018 “vaccine incident” reported by Chinese and foreign mainstream media, and analyzed the differences on the discourse constructions among reports in China, the United Kingdom, and the United States from the perspective of Proximization theory. It is found that there are significant differences between Chinese and foreign media in distinguishing IDC/ODC and deploying axiological proximization and spatial proximization, but the use of temporal proximization is similar, which serves to legitimize their own attitudes and views on the “vaccine event”. Furthermore, Yan (2019) conducted a comparative analysis of anti-corruption discourse in Chinese and American media, and made a critical cognitive linguistic study from the perspective of Proximization theory. The study suggested that Chinese media use more temporal proximization strategies to legitimize long-term and ongoing anti-corruption policies and more positive axiological proximization strategies to enhance the authority of the government and the confidence of the people. However, Western media use more spatial proximization strategies to highlight the severity of China's corruption and more negative axiological proximization to try to suppress the effectiveness of China's anti-corruption policies. Besides, previous study also compared the application of proximization theory in original text and the translation version. Cao (2021) took the discourse of “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” as the research subject, and conducted English translation research of the discourse regarding the community of shared future for mankind from the perspective of Proximization theory. This study revealed that the frequency of deploying the proximization theory in the English translation version is significantly higher than that in the Chinese original text, but the distribution ratios of the three types in both texts are the same. The most prominent strategy is spatial proximization, followed by axiological proximization, and temporal proximization. According to these contents, China's peace-loving, friendly and positive image has been established.

To summarize, as the above reviews indicate, there have been major developments regarding the application of Proximization Theory. However, the existing proximization studies attach much importance to public discourses, particularly politics, public health, international relations and so on. Cap (2010) has noted that the Proximization Theory is more suitable for the discourse that seeks legitimization of pre-emptive reaction to the potential threats, in other words, discourse that contains negative and threatening elements. Therefore, this study attempts to analyse President Putin's over 10,000 — words speech on the Russia-Ukraine conflict to further widen the applicability of Proximization Theory and provide a new perspective for analyzing the speaker's ideologies.

### 3. Data

The present study focuses on President Putin's speech on the Russia-Ukraine conflict which is published on the Beijing daily website (<https://www.bjd.com.cn/index.shtml>) in February 2022, with a total of over 15,000 words.

President Putin has historically explained Russia's relationship with Ukraine, the origin of the Ukrainian territory, and pointed out that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was Ukrainian radicals and nationalists that brought Western powers into Ukraine to counter the so-called "Russian threats". The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has also reneged on its promise and continued to expand eastward, compressing Russia's territories and posing a serious threat to Russia's national security. And it is the reason why Russia is taking the current action. The Ukrainian crisis has been brewing before 2022. The United States and the United Kingdom are constantly predicting war and sowing discord between Russia and Ukraine. Russia stood firm and showed her armed forces, and Ukraine continued to make the situation even tenser under the inducement of the United States and Britain. Faced with the complex international situation, Russia's politics and economy will inevitably be affected, and the Russian authorities must take urgent measures to deal with it. As a result, Putin delivered a speech to express his attitude to the world and appeal to the Russian people and patriots for their support.

### 4. Research findings

#### 4.1 Spatial Proximization

Spatial proximization refers to the gradual physical invasion of IDCs (speakers and hearers) caused by ODCs in the discourse space, which is mainly reflected in the use of some noun phrases and verb phrases. It includes six categories: Noun Phrases (NPs) are identified as elements in the deictic center of discourse space (IDC); Noun Phrases (NPs) are identified as elements outside the deictic center of discourse space (ODC); Verb Phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality constructed as markers of movement of ODCs toward the deictic center; Verb Phrases (VPs) of action are constructed as markers of the influence exerted by ODCs upon IDCs; Abstract noun phrases (NPs) are constructed as expectations of the influence exerted by ODCs upon IDCs; the noun phrase (NPs) indicates the result of the impact of ODCs on IDCs (Cap, 2013). The following subsections showcase the spatial dimension of PT in Putin's presentation. The detailed analyses are as follows:

##### 4.1.1 Noun Phrases (NPs) as elements in the deictic center of discourse space (IDC)

Noun Phrases (NPs) identified as elements in the center of discourse space (IDC) indicate central entities (IDC, henceforth), which means that noun phrases in discourse represent the speaker himself and his community of interests. They have common positive values and ideology and exist in the center of the discourse space. In President Putin's speech, all "Russia", "Russian people" and other related noun phrases are regarded as IDCs. For example, "Russia", "Russian state", "Russian people", "Our people" and so on. These noun phrases represent subjects who are on the same front as President Putin (the speaker) and the Russia and they share values and ideologies.

##### 4.1.2 Noun Phrases (NPs) as elements outside the deictic center of discourse space (ODC)

Noun Phrases (NPs) which are recognized as elements outside the deictic center of discourse space (ODC) refer to some that are opposed to IDCs, representing negative values in speech. At the periphery of the discourse space, they have the negative impact on IDCs. In the speech, all noun phrases which are opposed to Russia are recognized as ODCs. For example, "Lenin and his comrades", "Stalin", "Nationalists", "Ukraine", "Selsheviks", "The German Empire and its allies", "West", "Ukrainian Nationalists and Neo-Nazis", "Terrorist gangs in the North Caucasus", "Ukrainian militants and nationalists" and so on. These entities are on the opposite side of IDCs and hold negative values which are threatening to the positive ideology of IDCs.

#### 4.1.3 Verb Phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality as markers of movement of ODCs

Verb Phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality constructed as markers of movement of ODCs toward the deictic center refer to verbs or verb phrases that mark the proximization of ODCs to IDCs in physical space. It is a dynamic process of inward movement, making the hearers feel the constant proximization caused by ODCs, thereby creating a sense of oppression, nervousness and anxieties. For example, When President Putin mentioned how the Ukrainian territory was formed, he said that:

Example (1):

"Stalin had already incorporated parts of Poland, Romania, and Hungary into the Soviet Union and handed them over to Ukraine. At the same time, as a compensation, Stalin transferred some of the former German territories to Poland, and in 1954 Khrushchev took Crimea away from Russia for some reasons and gave it to Ukraine. In fact, this is how the territory of Soviet Ukraine was formed."

Example (2):

"I'll say it again, not only the territory, but the Russian people in the history were transferred together."

Example (3):

"Lenin's strong orders forcibly push the Donbass into Ukraine."

In these sentences, Putin pointed out that most of the territory of Ukraine was taken from Russia given by Stalin and Khrushchev. Among them, "incorporate", "hand over", "take away", "give to", "transfer", and "forcibly push" are all Verb Phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality, indicating the destruction of the Russian territory. These kind of verbs and verb phrases embody the movement in position from ODCs towards IDCs, which lead to the territorial sovereignty negatively transferred so that it damages Russia's interests and values. The hearers may know that their territory has been destructed before and the current situation may cause the same negative consequences, thereby arousing dissatisfaction and resentment in the hearts of the people.

#### 4.1.4 Verb Phrases (VPs) of action as markers of the influence exerted by ODCs

Verb Phrases (VPs) of action constructed as markers of the influence exerted by ODCs upon IDCs mean that ODCs exerts influence on IDCs, which shows that the actions of ODCs have a negative impact on IDCs, and these series of actions are usually expressed in verbs or verb phrases. The examples (3-5) showcase the use of this sub-strategy.

Example (3):

"And Lenin and his comrades broke up and tore up parts of Russia's historic territory in a very rude way."

Example (4):

"Without thinking, they began to stir up, incited and play with national sentiments and promise anything to potential supporters."

Example (5):

"They called on extremist groups including radical Islamic groups and launched terrorist attacks on critical infrastructure by relying on sabotaging the penetration of organizations and kidnapping of Russian citizens."

Among the above examples, verb phrases such as "broke up", "tore up", "stir up", "incite", "play with", "sabotage", "launched terrorist attacks" and "kidnapping" are actions done by ODCs. These words have a strong sense of terror and horror, which will create fear in the hearers. The opposite entities did series of cruel actions to disrupt the social stability of Russia and threaten national security with intrusions and attacks from the outside. The hearers will reach a consensus that Russia will suffer a lot if the country does not act against it.

#### 4.1.5 Abstract noun phrases (NPs) as expectations of the influence exerted by ODCs

The abstract noun phrases are constructed as expectations of the influence exerted by ODCs upon IDCs, which means that the influential actions and power of ODCs may have an impact on IDCs, and these effects have not happened in the present, but may cause harm in the future. It is a kind of

prediction which taking advantage of Noun phrases to express such expectations. The specific uses of this sub-strategy are shown as follows:

Example (6):

“For Russia, things are going to change dramatically. We cannot fail to respond to this real danger, especially, I would like to stress again, that Western sponsors may facilitate the emergence of such weapons in Ukraine, which would pose another threat on our country ”

Example (7):

“In other words, the choice of one's own security cannot pose a threat to other countries, but The choice of Ukraine to join in NATO is a direct threat to Russia's security”.

Among them, the word "threat" is included in each sentence, but the actions of causing these threats are only predictions. In present, there is no specific policy and action to prove that these threats have already appeared. However, it indicates that Ukraine, Western forces, NATO and other ODCs have great possibility to pose a threat to Russia in the future and increase the risk of being in danger.

#### 4.1.6 The noun phrase (NPs) indicating the result of the impact of ODCs on IDCs

The noun phrase (NPs) indicating the result of the impact of ODCs on IDCs means that the actions of ODCs have a realistic and destructive impact on IDCs.

Example (7):

“They also tried to blackmail us again relying on sanctions.”

Example (8):

“And the purpose was the same — to contain Russia’s development.”

Among these sentences, "sanctions" and "containment" show that NATO and other Western forces as well as Ukraine's practical actions against Russia, and these actions have been happened or are taking place in present. More importantly, they have a negative impact on Russia.

## 4.2 Temporal Proximization

Temporal proximization refers to the past and future events approaching the present and having an impact on the present. It includes five categories: the use of non-definitive descriptive noun phrases to construct the influence of ODCs acting in other time, the use of the simple past tense and the present perfect tense, the use of nominalized phrases to presuppose the influence caused by ODCs at any time in the future, the use of modal verb phrases to construct a lasting impact of ODCs on the present and the future and the use of contrasting sentences to construct the alienated world in the future. The detailed analyses are as follows:

### 4.2.1 The use of non-identifying deictic noun phrases

A deictic word is a phrase composed of an article, a common noun and its determiners. A non-definite descriptive noun phrase is a deictic word that includes an indefinite article (such as a, an) such as "an apple", where "an" replaces the indefinite pronoun. It indicates that the phrase does not refer to a specific object. In the temporal proximization theory, the application of fuzzy time to reflect the threat of ODCs has great uncertainty.

Example (9):

“In recent months, western weapons are being transported to Ukraine from all around the world. ”

Example (10):

“In recent years, NATO countries have taken military exercises as an excuse to constantly send their military contingents on the territory of Ukraine.”

Among these sentences, “in recent months” and “in recent years” are both vague times. It conveys that Western forces and Ukraine are preparing to sanction Russia, but it is not clear when the crisis will occur, leaving room for the hearers to imagine and creating unknown fears.

### 4.2.2 The use of the simple past tense and the present perfect tense

The simple past tense and the present perfect tense mainly record past events and play the role of "past-present" proximization.

Example (11):

“In March 2021, the Ukrainian Navy held a joint exercise in the Black Sea with NATO's permanent maritime demining ships.”

Example (12):

"At least, they have planned to conduct more than a dozen such joint military exercises next year." and "Today such a Combat Operations Center has been deployed in Ochakov."

As far as sentences we can see, “in March 2021” is the past time. And “has been deployed” is the present perfect tense. Except for the above examples, these two tenses have appeared many times, which shows that Russia has faced constant threats in the past and may face the same threats today.

#### **4.2.3 The use of nominalized phrases to presuppose the influence caused by ODCs**

Nominalization refers to the transformation of processes and activities into states and objects, and the conversion of concrete things into abstract things (Fairclough, 1995).

Example (13):

“The germ of nationalism has not gone away. The original landmines have destroyed the country’s immunity against nationalism and are waiting in the wings.”

Among them, nominalized phrases such as "germ" and "landmine" visualize the bad influence suffered by Russia into a specific thing, which more intuitively increases the panic of the hearers and enhances the urgency of eliminating the threat. Such phrases have a direct impact on the hearers.

#### **4.2.4 The modal verb phrases to construct a lasting impact of ODCs**

The use of modal verb phrases can convey the uncertainty of the situations and the likelihood that the situation will continue.

Example (12):

"If such systems are deployed in Ukraine, they will be able to strike targets in the entire European part of Russia and outside the mountains."

Example (13):

"For Russia, the situation will change dramatically."

Among these examples, they use modal verbs to reflect the continuity of time, the possibility of threats, and the sense of impending oppression. To a large extent, it will increase the fear of the hearers.

#### **4.2.5 The use of contrasting sentences to construct the alienated world in the future**

The use of contrasting sentences to construct the alienated world in the future means that there are two kinds of sentences holding the opposite values and they provide contrast with each other.

Example (14):

“Russia has always cooperated openly and honestly with Ukraine, and our relationship has developed in all areas while respecting Ukraine’s interests.”

“The Ukrainian regime wants to take advantage of its relations with Russia, but does not undertake any obligations.”

In this example, President Putin used a contrasting sentence to place Ukraine on the opposite side of the value, which express that Russia has always upheld justice and openly and honestly cooperative with Ukraine, whereas the Ukrainian side only wants to take petty advantages so that this kind of confrontation is likely to extend into the future.

### **4.3 Axiological Proximization**

Axiological Proximization refers to the opposition between the home values of IDCs and the alien and antagonistic values of ODCs. The speakers seek to avoid the influence of the latter approaching the former, and highlight the rationality of the current actions. Two dimensions are included which are noun phrases representing positive values or ideologies of IDCs and noun phrases representing negative values or ideologies of ODCs.

#### 4.3.1 Noun phrases representing positive values or ideologies of IDCs

Example (15):

“Our people — It is the people that recognized the new geopolitical realities that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and recognized the new independent states. Not only did they recognize this, but also Russia, who was in trouble at the time, helped its partners in the CIS, including their Ukrainian friends. Meanwhile, at the moment of their independence, they began to make big requests for material support, which was provided by our country with respect for Ukraine’s sovereignty.”

This paragraph shows that Russian people have always shown great respect for the independence and territorial sovereignty of other countries. At the same time, they try their best to do what they can to help and support them. Despite being unfairly treated after the split of the Soviet Union, Russia still recognizes the new independent state, helps other CIS partners, and represents positive values and ideology.

#### 4.3.2 Noun phrases representing negative values or ideologies of ODCs

Example (16):

"I want to emphasize that—from the beginning, they have built their country by denying everything that brings us together. They are trying to distort the consciousness of the people and the historical memories of millions of people, and many generations of people living in Ukraine. It is not surprising that Ukrainian society faces the rise of ultra-nationalism, which manifests itself in the form of aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism. As a result, Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis are involved in terrorism in the North Caucasus, and their clamor for the occupation of the Russian lands is getting louder.”

These sentences contain words such as "deny", "distort", "aggressive,", “terrorism” and "clamor". They show that Ukraine has been destroying the friendship with Russia. They distort people’s value and thoughts in order to establish a considerable popular base to attack and threaten Russia. These noun phrases create threatening competitors for the hearers, and construct the negative values and ideology of ODCs.

## 5. Summary

This paper analyzed the national television speech delivered by President Putin’s on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict published on the Beijing daily website in February 2022, and investigated how President Putin deploys discourse strategies to explain the legitimacy of launching special military operations through the Proximization Theory. The research finds that in terms of space proximization, President Putin has constructed Western forces and Ukraine's actions and attitudes as a looming threat, which makes the audience feel fearful, thus arousing the Russian hearers’ sense of imminence of external threats. Hence, it lays a solid foundation on launching military affairs for Russia. In the light of temporal proximization, Putin mainly uses the past tense and enumerate a large number of facts that happened in the past which shows the proximization of the facts of the past to the present and the future. And he seeks legalized support for preventive and countermeasures; In terms of axiological proximization, Putin mainly employs the ideological confrontation between IDCs and ODCs, emphasizing that the conflict is intensified and the confrontation continues so that measures should be taken immediately. The analysis of the study allows for a better understanding of the application of Proximization Theory into war conflicts, which is of research value in dealing with the international political relationships. The study of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict using the STA model of Proximization Theory, which has been of a new research perspective, has taken on a new dimension in the new era and is of great significance in expanding the field of academic research on the political conflicts. However, due to the limitation of time and space, this paper only selects one report and fails to make a quantitative analysis. In addition, the study selects the speech of the leader representing one party in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and cannot make a comparative study to analyze the reports of the Ukrainian authorities or other countries in the incident. As for further study, the

research can build a corpus by selecting reports from multiple sources and compare the attitudes and ideologies of different political sides towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

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