

A Proximization Study of Critical Discourse Analysis -- A Case Study of President Joe Biden's 2022 State of the Union Address

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Abstract. This paper analyzes Biden's 2022 State of the Union Address using proximization theory to investigate how Biden legitimized his policies in his State of the Union Address. The study finds that Biden fully utilized temporal, spatial and axiological proximization theories in his State of the Union Address. In terms of spatial proximization, Biden mainly mentioned numerous entities that might bring threats to America to create fear in the minds of the audience, thus achieving the purpose of policy legitimization. On temporal proximization, Biden proximized the events that happened in the past or the events in the future to the present to cause the panics. The axiological proximization was mainly manifested in the construction of positive values for America and in emphasizing harms and negative values of the entities that threaten America. This study provides insights into the application of the spatial-temporal-axiological model of proximization theory to the State of the Union Address.

Keywords: State of the Union Address; Joe Biden; Proximization Theory; Legitimization.

1. Introduction

Language is closely linked with Politics. In the field of political linguistics, language that contains political information is used as a political language, which helps the spread and communication of Politics (Hu, 2002). When it comes to analyzing functions of political language, political linguists largely adopt theories and approaches of Linguistics. Among these theories and approaches, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, henceforth) seems to be the best way to explore the manifestations of politics in language (Tang & Wu, 2021). In the field of political linguistics, critical discourse analysis is used to investigate the relationship between language, power and ideology. In addition, CDA can also help people understand and address the role of language in the construction of ideology and social subjects. (Tang & Wu, 2021).

In the development of CDA, different approaches were proposed to analyze critical discourse, such as Halliday's (2000) Systemic Functional Grammar, Fairclough's (1992) Three-dimensional Model, and the Discourse-historical approach of Wodak (2001), and so on. In recent years, proximization theory (PT, henceforth) has been widely used in the study of CDA. Cap (2008) initially put forward the spatial-temporal-axiological (STA model, henceforth) analytic model of proximization theory based on discourse space theory of Chilton (2004) (PT, henceforth). PT majorly examines the forced construal operation on discourse (Cap, 2013). PT has been widely applied to political, economic and environmental discourse, and it has demonstrated its strong explanatory power in various topics of discourse (e.g., Cap, 2008; Wu & Niu, 2018; Yan & Zhang, 2018). This paper chooses U.S. President Joe Biden's 2022 *State of the Union Address* as research material and applies proximization theory to provide a qualitative analysis of this discourse to analyze how the Biden administration legitimizes its policies from spatial, temporal and axiological dimensions. This study may shed light on the discourse analysis of the American government and the management of the American image.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The theoretical framework of proximization theory

Proximization theory (Cap, 2013) is about constructing crisis and threat, and its main purpose is to explain how speakers in public speaking construct a three-dimensional discourse space in the mind of the audience and legitimize their own words through discursive strategies. The three-dimensional discourse space is constructed by the three axes of time, space and value, namely spatial proximization, temporal proximization and axiological proximization. In this space discourse, the inside-the-deictic-center entities (IDCs) usually refer to speakers and listeners, and beyond IDCs are the outside-the-deictic-center entities (ODCs) that pose threats to IDCs. Through words, speakers describe scenes that ODCs impend over IDCs via spatial proximization, temporal proximization and axiological proximization, thus creating a sense of fear and oppression in listeners, and finally legitimizing their own words.

As a strategic construal operation, spatial proximization refers to the process in which peripheral entities(ODCs), are constantly approaching the central entities (IDCs) in physical space (Cap, 2014). The differences between the center and the periphery can be both geographic and geopolitical distance as well as ideological differences. The central and peripheral entities are opposing, so in spatial proximization, speakers intentionally make listeners be aware of the threat generated by peripheral entities, which can only be avoided by taking the necessary actions (Pan, 2017).

Temporal proximization centers on the present time while reflecting a conceptual shift in time. For instance, speakers forcibly shift the negative impact of past events to the present and the negative impact of possible future events to the present (Cap, 2013). The aim is to create a cognitive panic in the recipient of the discourse, thus legitimizing the discourse and the political action to be taken by speakers.

Axiological proximization refers to artificially forced conflicts arising from the ideological opposition between central and peripheral entities in the discourse space. The accumulated ideological conflicts between IDCs and ODCs have the potential to become practical conflicts, and at the same time will potentially have a practical impact on IDCs (Wu et al, 2016).

2.2 The empirical studies of the application of proximization theory

Since Cap (2008) proposed PT, many scholars have been applying it to discourse analysis of different topics by combining different research methods. At present, the empirical studies applying PT to analyze discourse can be divided into two categories: comparative studies of different languages or different political identities and monolingual empirical research.

The comparative studies include the comparison of different political identities on the same topic and the comparison between the source language and the target language. The fields of the comparison of different political identities include politics (e.g., Yan, 2019), public health (e.g., Zhang & Zhang, 2020), economy (e.g., Yan & Zhang, 2018), environment (e.g., Wang, 2019) and culture (e.g., Liu & Deng, 2021). For example, Zhang and Zhang(2020)applied PT to analyze the corpus of Chinese and foreign mainstream media reports on the 2018 Changchun vaccine. Their quantitative and qualitative analyses showed that there were significant differences in the spatial proximization of Chinese and foreign media. In terms of temporal proximization, Chinese and foreign media displayed the same feature, with both focusing on the conceptual shift from the past to the present and the future to the present. In addition, there were differences in the IDCs' and ODCs' values that they understand in terms of production standards and quality, security and trust. The number of the study on the comparison between the source language and the target language is limited. For example, Cao (2021) applied PT to analyze the Chinese and English translations of speeches on *A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind* delivered by national leaders. It was found that the frequency of using PT in the translation was significantly higher than that in the original Chinese text, but the distribution of the three types of PT in the translations and the original text tended to be the

same. The spatial proximization was the most prominent, axiological proximization was the second, and temporal proximization was the least.

In terms of monolingual empirical research, scholars do research on topics including politics, economy, public health, culture and education, and ecological environment. In Politics, there are topics on anti-terrorism war (e.g., Cap, 2013), diplomatic discourse analysis (e.g., He, 2021), immigration (e.g., Hart 2010), national security and energy security (e.g., Liu, 2021), military (e.g., He, 2020), political leaders' speeches (e.g., Jin, 2020) and national images shaped by other nations (e.g., Liao & Wu, 2019); in economy, there are topics on Sino – US trade war (e.g., Liu, 2019); in public health, materials are largely news reports or files about COVID-19 or vaccines (Yao, 2021); in culture and education, some scholars use PT to analyze the conflict of values and the language styles of different characters in drama (Fang & Yu, 2021) and others have also used PT to analyze the way English teachers construct discourse space and promote students' understanding so as to create a good language image of teachers and achieve the ultimate goal of social cognition (Sun, 2018); in ecological environment, some scholars selected an article on sea turtle conservation online to analyze via PT (Guo, 2020), while others collected 10 speeches of the UN Secretary-General on climate change, built a corpus and then applied PT to analyze them (Li, 2020). In addition, Yang (2019) used multimodal PT to help readers understand the cognitive mechanisms behind the deceptive features of online rumors and Zhou (2021) used German media reports related to the "Huawei threat theory" as a corpus to explore the media's position by using PT. The study found that the German media used spatial proximization to enhance the aggressiveness of the U.S. side in advocating the "Huawei threat theory" and implicitly questioned the legitimacy of its behavior; in the temporal dimension, a large number of modal verbs and parallel contrasting discourses in the corpus highlighted the German side's concern about the development of the situation; in the axiological dimension, the German media conveyed a clear message: Huawei's threat theory was still speculation and there was no evidence.

3. Research Material

The *State of the Union Address* is the annual report that the President of the United States delivers to Congress at the beginning of each year, covering the domestic and international conditions that the President faces each year and the policy measures that the administration will take. On March 1, 2022, in Washington, D.C., Biden delivered his *State of the Union Address* to a joint congressional session. Facing the midterm elections, the escalating international conflict between Russia and Ukraine, domestic inflation, the COVID pandemic and other problems, as well as Biden's declining public support since taking office and the intensification of the conflict between the two parties, Biden's speech is undoubtedly an important moment to regain national support.

This study obtained the full text of Biden's *State of the Union Address* from the official website of the White House, with a total of 7,715 words. The *State of the Union Address* can be divided into foreign and domestic sections: foreign affairs only mention the U.S. attitude and measures to be taken in the Russia-Ukraine conflict; domestic affairs focus on topics such as inflation and the COVID pandemic. This study uses Biden's 2022 *State of the Union Address* as data to explore the proximization strategies used in President Biden's speech to manipulate language to redeem his image and legitimize his political actions.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Spatial Proximization

Spatial proximization refers to the gradual approach of ODCs to IDCs in physical space, by which speakers create panic in the mind of listeners and make listeners feel compelled to act against the ODCs, which also serves the purpose of legitimizing the speakers' discourse. Cap (2013, p. 108) argues that at the lexical-grammatical level, six lexical-grammatical items that can be identified

ODCs intruding on IDCs: “noun phrases (NPs) interpreted as components of the deictic center of the DS (IDCs); noun phrases (NPs) interpreted as components outside the deictic center of the DS (ODCs); VPs of motion and directionality interpreted as labels of movement of ODCs to the deictic center; VPs of action interpreted as labels of the impact of ODCs on IDCs; NPs indicating abstract concepts interpreted as anticipations of the impact of ODCs on IDCs; NPs indicating abstract concepts interpreted as effects of the impact of ODCs on IDCs”.

4.1.1 Noun phrases (NPs) as components of the deictic center of the DS (IDCs)

IDCs refer to audiences of discourse who share common interests, ideologies, etc. with speakers. In Biden’s 2022 State of the Union Address, IDCs differ when talking about domestic and foreign affairs.

When it comes to the foreign affairs, IDCs include “Americans”, “the American people”, “democrats”, “republicans”, “independents”, “President Zelensky”, “Ukraine”, “the Ukrainian people”, “the world”, “the free world”, “the West” and “the NATO Alliance”. Noticeably, Biden took republicans to his side to blur the increasing differences between two adversarial parties and then to show the world a consistent attitude on Russia – Ukraine affairs. By expanding his own group of IDCs, Biden created an atmosphere that Russia was faced with great counterparts.

However, when the discourse turned to the domestic arena, President Biden’s group was significantly narrowed to include mainly American people and refugees, such as “Americans”, “America”, “fellow Americans”, “families”, “working people”, “folks”, “middle class”, “refugees”.

4.1.2 Noun phrases (NPs) as components outside the deictic center of the DS (ODCs)

ODCs refer to people or groups of people who are opposed to the interests and ideologies of IDCs. By describing ODCs’ proximizing to IDCs on three axes of space, time and value, speakers legitimize their discourse by making IDCs feel panicked.

On the Russia-Ukraine affairs, Biden mainly considered Russia, its military and its economy as ODCs, with specific lexical expressions such as “Russia’s Vladimir Putin”, “Putin”, “he”, “dictators”, “the Russian oligarchs”, and “the corrupt leaders”.

On domestic affairs, Biden divided ODCs into five categories: the political category, the economic category, health and wellness, social security, and the ecological environment. The expressions include “Congress”, “inflation”, “the previous tax system” “COVID-19”, “diseases”, “the variants”, “cancers”. “guns”, “human traffickers”, “drug smuggling”; “climate change”.

4.1.3 VPs of motion and directionality as movement of ODCs to IDCs

When talking about the Russia-Ukraine affairs, Biden used many verbs of motion to create a negative image of Putin and Russia, thus creating a climate of terror. Examples are as follows.

(1) “Six days ago, Russia’s Vladimir Putin **sought to shake** the very foundations of the free world, thinking he could **make it bend to** his menacing ways. he badly miscalculated.”

Biden used “sought to” to convey the message that Putin-led Russia was gradually invading Ukraine, followed by “take” to exacerbate the seriousness of Russia's aggression, as Russia was shaking up not only Ukraine but the entire Western world. Biden followed with “make it bend to his menacing ways” to describe Putin’s desire to bring the Western free world to his knees. The verb “make” means “force or compel someone to do something” and the verb phrase “bend to” means “to force or compel someone to do something”. By using “make” and “bend”, Biden made the recipient of the discourse feel constantly threatened by the ODC. Biden’s words allowed listeners to subconsciously make up their minds to resist ODCs and strengthened the recognition and pride in IDCs, greatly rallying the West world led by the United States.

4.1.4 VPs of action as labels of the impact of ODCs on IDCs

On the Russia-Ukraine affairs, Biden used fewer sentences that use behavioral verbs to describe Russia’s exertion of influence on the IDCs to boost morale and give hope to those in the IDCs. In

contrast, on domestic matters, Biden used many such verbs. For example, in legitimizing his policy to deal with inflation, Biden said:

(2) “Inflation is **robbing** them **of** gains they thought otherwise they would be able to feel. I get it. That’s why my top priority is getting prices under control.”

Biden anthropomorphized inflation by using “robbing... of...” to make its image concrete in the minds of the recipients of the discourse: inflation robbed the American people of the benefits they thought they would gain. Biden thus proposed and legitimized his policy: to lower the cost of consumption for the American people, that is, his plan to “build a better America”.

4.1.5 NPs indicating abstract concepts as impacts of ODCs on IDCs

(3) “Throughout our history, we’ve learned this lesson: When dictators do not pay a price for their aggression, they cause more chaos; they keep moving; and the **costs**, the **threats** to the America — and America, to the world keeps rising.”

In the face of Russian-Ukrainian affairs, Biden regarded the aggression of dictators such as Russia as “chaos”, “costs” and “threats”. Biden’s remarks made the audience realize that if “we” did not resist Russia’s aggression, the United States and the world would be plunged into chaos and pay the price for non-resistance, which legitimized the presence of the U.S.-led NATO “to secure peace and stability in Europe” and provided a reason for the U.S. government to support Ukraine.

4.1.6 NPs indicating abstract concepts as effects of the impact of ODCs on IDCs

(4) “For the past 40 years, we were told that tax breaks for those at the top and benefits would trickle down and everyone would - would benefit. But that **trickle-down theory** led to **a weaker economic growth, lower wages, bigger deficits, and a widening gap between the top and everyone else in the - in nearly a century.**”

Biden saw the previous tax policy as ODC and pointed out a series of consequences of this tax policy: “a weaker economic growth, lower wages, bigger deficits and a widening gap”. These words made the audience be aware of the serious consequences of the previous tax policy and legitimized Biden’s subsequent policy proposal to build a “new economic vision for America”, such as bottom-up economic development.

4.2 Temporal proximization

Temporal proximization is centered on the present, bringing what happened in the past and what may happen in the future closer to the present and achieving conceptual transfer (Fang & Yu, 2021). Cap (2013, p.114) mentioned five lexico-grammatical ways of showing the temporal proximization of ODCs on IDCs: “Noun phrases (NPs) concerning indefinite descriptions interpreting ODC actual effect acts in alternative temporal frames; discourse forms concerning contradistinctive use of the simple past and the present perfect interpreting threatening future extending infinitely from a past instant; noun phrases (NPs) concerning nominalization interpreting presupposition of conditions for ODC effect to arise anytime in the future; verb phrases (VPs) concerning modal auxiliaries interpreting conditions for ODC effect as existing continually between the now and the infinite future; discourse forms concerning parallel contradistinctive construal of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the now”.

4.2.1 The use of indefinite deictic noun phrases

(5) “Look, our economy roared back faster than almost anyone predicted, but **the pandemic** meant that businesses had **a hard time** hiring enough people because of the pandemic to keep up production in their factories.”

Speaking on domestic economic issues, Biden mentioned the negative impacts of COVID-19 on U.S. businesses. COVID-19 had increased the audience’s concern and fear of economic problems, and they hoped that measures could be taken to deal with these problems. Biden then proposed his measures to the domestic economic problems, undoubtedly achieving the purpose of policy legitimization.

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

(6) “You know, we **have lost** so much in COVID-19. Time with one another. The worst of all, the much loss of life. Let’s use this moment to reset. So, stop looking at COVID as a partisan dividing line. See it for what it is: a God-awful disease. Let’s stop sending - seeing each other as enemies and start seeing each other for who we are: fellow Americans.”

Biden used the present perfect tense of the word “lose” to describe the danger that COVID-19 had brought to the U.S. and that it might continue to do so, which would create fear and hand-wringing about the COVID-19 at the audience’s cognitive level, and immediately afterward, Biden suggested that bipartisan unity on coronavirus is needed, rather than using it as a bipartisan “dividing line”. These words established a sensible and friendly presidential image for him in front of the American public, and also won goodwill among people of both parties.

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 transformation of concrete things into abstract things (Fairclough, 1995).

(7) “We’ve sent 475 million vaccine doses to 112 countries — more than any nation on Earth. We won’t stop, because you can’t build a wall high enough to keep out a —A vaccine — the vaccine can stop the **spread** of these diseases.”

When Biden proposed four steps to deal with the coronavirus, he abstracted these diseases, the aforementioned COVID-19 and new variants, with “spread”. He tried to make the audience generate the idea that the coronavirus was everywhere and all the time, thus building fear of the New Crown epidemic in the audience's perception and allowing him to reach the point of legitimizing his policy of providing vaccines to the world.

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

(8) “Like many of you, I spent countless hours unifying our European Allies. We shared with the world, in advance, what we knew Putin was planning and precisely how he **would** try to falsely and justify his aggression.”

On Russia-Ukraine affairs, Biden used “would” to indicate that Putin’s behavior to justify his aggression would happen and might continue. These words would create a sense of panic in listeners’ perception level that Putin’s aggression would not stop soon and might spread elsewhere, and therefore listeners would feel that they should act against Putin’s aggression.

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

Biden used a lot of contrasting sentences when speaking about his economic achievements, for example:

(9) “And **unlike** the \$2 trillion tax cut passed in the previous administration that benefitted the top 1 percent of Americans, **the American Rescue Plan** helped working people and left no one behind. And, folks — and it worked. It worked. **In fact**, our economy created over 6.5 million new jobs just last year, more jobs in one year **than ever before in the history of the United States of America.**”

In discussing his economic achievements since taking office, Biden compared the performance of the current to that of the one. By comparing the previous administration’s policies, which only helped the top 1% of Americans, Biden tried to increase his favorability with his audience. At the same time, he continued to add to his economic success by comparing the current administration to all previous administrations, such as comparing the number of new jobs created by his policies to the number created by other administrations. The success further highlighted his ability to govern and the viability of “the American Rescue Plan”.

4.3 Axiological proximization

Axiological proximization refers to the existence of ideological differences between IDCs and ODCs, which may gradually evolve from ideological conflicts to actual conflicts, and the words showing axiological proximization maybe concrete words or abstract words (Cap, 2013). Cap (2013,

p.121) pointed out that the essential items of lexical-grammatical construction are from three aspects of axiological proximization: “Noun phrases (NPs) interpreted as IDC positive values or value sets (ideologies); noun phrases (NPs) interpreted as ODC negative values or value sets (ideologies); discourse forms concerning the linear arrangement of lexico-grammatical phrases interpreting materialization in the IDC space of the ODC negative ideologies”.

4.3.1 Noun phrases (NPs) interpreted as IDC positive values or value sets (ideologies);

When Biden talked about the Russia-Ukraine affairs, he mostly used nouns and phrases such as “freedom”, “determination”, “peace and stability”, “unity”, and “democracy”, which were in line with the values and ideologies of the IDCs, and helped Biden united the entire West world against Russia. When talking about domestic affairs, Biden mostly used noun phrases such as “pride”, “equality”, and “responsibility and opportunity”, which were in line with the values or ideologies unique to the United States and helped Biden to rally people's hearts and minds. There is an example given to aid understanding:

(10) “We spent months building coalitions of other **freedom-loving nations** in Europe and the Americas to — from America to the Asian and African continents to confront Putin.”

In Biden’s remarks, The word “coalitions” is the concrete expression of the spirit of unity, collective power, etc. “Freedom-loving nations” is the concrete expression of the spirit of freedom and democracy in the west world.

4.3.2 Noun phrases (NPs) interpreted as ODC negative values or value sets (ideologies)

Biden mentioned far fewer NPs representing ODCs’ negative values or ideologies than IDCs’ positive values or ideologies in his speech. His intended to convince his audience in the discursive space that they could overcome difficulties under Biden's leadership, despite the reality of the situation, and to create a credible and powerful image of the president. The expressions include “tyranny”, “aggression”, “autocracies” and so on.

(11) “We shared with the world, in advance, what we knew Putin was planning and precisely how he would try to falsely and justify his **aggression**. We countered Russia’s **lies** with the truth.”

Here, “lies” is a specific expression of Putin’s “aggression”. Biden meant to convey to listeners a message that no matter what Putin excused his actions were wrong so as to strengthen IDCs’ will of freedom, independence and democracy.

5. Conclusion

This study applied PT to analyze Biden’s 2022 *State of the Union Address*. The study found that Biden fully utilized temporal, spatial and axiological proximization theories in his *State of the Union Address*. Concerning spatial proximization, Biden mainly mentioned numerous entities that may bring threats to America to create fear in the minds of the audience, thus achieving the purpose of policy legitimization. In terms of temporal proximization, Biden proximized the events that happened in the past or the events in the future to the present to cause the panic. The axiological proximization was mainly manifested in the construction of positive values for America and in emphasizing the harms and negative values of the entities that threaten America.

However, this study only used qualitative analysis but neglected quantitative analysis to study Biden’s 2022 *State of the Union Address*, so the data was slightly weak. In the next step, the future study plans to collect the texts of several presidents’ State of the Union speeches to build a corpus to analyze the characteristics of presidential discourse strategies with generalizations or to compare the specific speech styles embodied by different government leaders when delivering their speeches.

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