

## THE LANGUAGE OF POWER IN POLITICAL CONFLICTS

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The language of power is well demonstrated in conflicting situations, especially when there is a conflict between different nations. Conflict management is not always easy: sometimes conflicts are easily resolved, sometimes the two conflicting sides want different things demonstrating their power. Power is a process of social interaction, and the relationship between the conflict participants affects the way they perceive and react to a conflict. Are the participants in a hierarchical or equal relationship? Does one tend to dominate the other? What role does power have in the discourse?

This paper seeks to find answers to these questions and analyze the manifestation of power through language by examining media debates, political articles, interviews and speeches of political figures on Armenian – Azerbaijani and Russian – Ukrainian conflicts.

**Keywords:** *Armenian – Azerbaijani conflict; Russian – Ukrainian conflict; power in language, political discourse.*

### Introduction

Much has been written regarding power in language. Power is often manifested by words: a mighty instrument which can either do good or harm. “The wide range of language functions and its versatility combine to make language powerful. Even so, this is only one part of what is in fact a dynamic relationship between language and power. The other part is that there is preexisting power behind language which it reveals and reflects, thereby transferring extra linguistic power to the communication context” (SH Ng & Deng, 2017).

Powerful individuals use language as a means to construct their power. This is especially obvious in conflicting situations. This paper aims at exploring the

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language of different political figures, at revealing different language means used by them to demonstrate their power over others.

The objectives of the research are:

- to analyse the causes and consequences of political conflicts, the processes of their relationship, i.e. whether the conflicting participants are in an equal relationship or one side tends to dominate the other one,
- to explore how national identities are linked to language and communication, and how the power and prestige of the conflicting sides in the world is manifested in the political discourse,
- to study the language means used to create influence and demonstrate the power of the conflicting sides.

The material for the research was collected from media: different articles, political speeches, debates were studied and analysed. The research was carried out from a sociolinguistic point to reveal the social, political and historical causes of manifestation of power, dominance and inequality in the political discourse of conflicting sides.

### **Language as a weapon in conflicts**

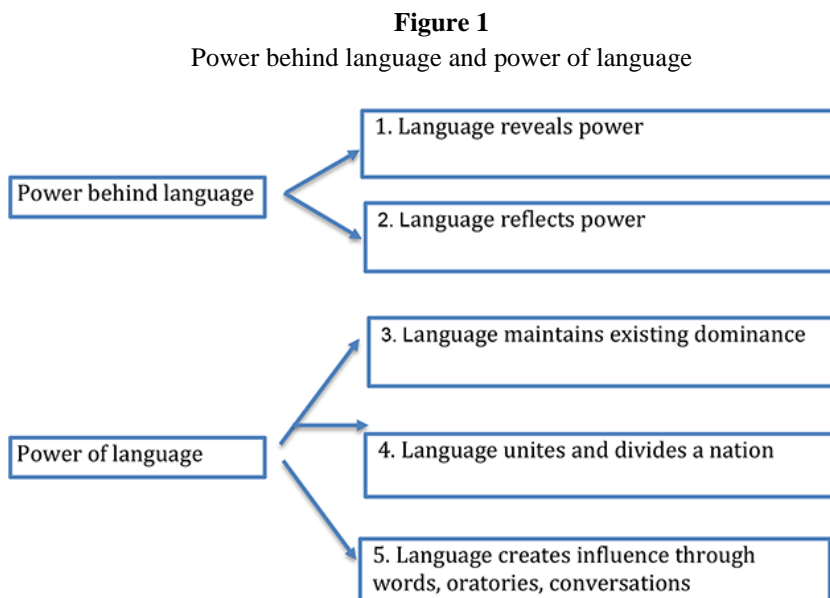
There is a great deal of pain and suffering in the world and many conflicts between groups, so language is considered to be a tool of conflict resolution. However, to most postmodernists language is primarily a “weapon” (Hicks, 2013).

Language is not about being aware of the world, or about distinguishing the true from the false, or even about argument in the traditional sense of validity, soundness, and probability. Accordingly, postmodernism recasts the nature of rhetoric: Rhetoric is persuasion in the absence of cognition. This explains the harsh nature of much postmodern rhetoric. The regular attempts to silence opposing voices are all logical consequences of the postmodern epistemology of language (Hicks, 2013). Language thus conceived is a model of organization that is both powerful and finite (Deeds, 1998).

According to Ruth Wodak “in all available genres, the use of language and communication as a ‘social practice’ enables dialogues, negotiations, argument and discussion, learning and remembering, and other functions (Wodak, 2012: 216-217).

Sik Hung Ng and Fei Dng in their article “Language and Power” have grouped the five language–power relationships into five boxes. However, they admit that the boundary between any two boxes is not meant “to be rigid but

permeable.” For example, by revealing the power behind a message (box 1), a message can create influence (box 5).



In the first two boxes language is viewed as having no power of its own and yet can produce influence and control by revealing the power behind the speaker. Language also reflects the collective/historical power of the language community that uses it.

In the case of the power of language, it is believed that language has power of its own. This power allows a language to maintain the power behind it, unite or divide a nation, and create influence. “A charismatic speaker, for example, may, by the sheer force of oratory, buoy up people’s hopes, convert their hearts from hatred to forgiveness, or embolden them to take up arms for a cause”.

Hence, this research explores the power of language; i.e. the language means used by different political figures and communities to demonstrate their might and dominion over others.

We have observed two recent conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as between Russia and Ukraine. The first turned into a war on September 27, 2020; the other war started on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February in 2022.

Armenian – Azerbaijani conflict started in 1988, when ethnic Armenians living in their ancient homeland Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) demanded the transfer of what was then the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO)

from Soviet Azerbaijan to Armenia. As the Soviet Union collapsed, tensions grew into an outright war. The first war ended in 1994 with the victory of Armenians, whereas the second war started in 2020.

### Armenian – Azerbaijani conflict

During the 44-day war Azerbaijan conquered most lands of Karabakh (Artsakh). President Ilham Aliyev believes that he has settled the Karabakh conflict by force, which is contrary to the principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, tasked with arriving at a permanent peace. The co-chairs of the Minsk Group — Russia, France and the US — maintain that the issue of the status of Karabakh has not been settled and further negotiations must take place. However, Azerbaijanis think otherwise.

Before the second war started, the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan claimed that *“Artsakh is Armenia, and that’s it.”* To this the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev responded on October 3, 2019 when he delivered a speech at the annual plenary session of the Valdai International Discussion Club, Sochi, Russia: *“Well, firstly, it is, to put it mildly, a lie. Karabakh by the whole world [with its] plains, uplands, is recognized as an integral part of Azerbaijan. Armenia itself does not recognize this illegal formation. Karabakh is a historical, original Azerbaijani land. So Karabakh is Azerbaijan and exclamation mark”* (Caspian News, 05/10/2019).

As seen in his speech the president of Azerbaijan seeks to be less aggressive and tries to be even polite by using the expression: *“to put it mildly.”*

The things have changed since the seven-week war in 2020. President Aliyev claims that Azerbaijan’s use of force has changed the facts on the ground and there is no territorial unit called Nagorno-Karabakh on the territory of Azerbaijan.

*Azerbaijan resolved this conflict alone, both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. Victory on the battlefield forced the enemy to raise the white flag and surrender, to sign the act of surrender. The document signed on November 10 is the act of Armenia’s surrender. (The Azeri Times, 13/05/2021)*

However, the Armenian side states that the conflict has not been solved yet. The Minsk Group (USA, RF and France), the activities of which have become known as the Minsk Process, spearheads the OSCE's efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

*The conflict has been resolved, and I believe that it is pointless to return to this issue. Anyway, we have demonstrated this in the post-war period. Firstly, if anyone believes that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is still not resolved, that's their problem. Secondly, this is a very dangerous position. If the conflict is not resolved, what should be the solution? Does this mean that the November 10 agreement is no longer valid? This is how I understand it. In fact, on November 10, a document was signed to resolve the problem.*

*If the conflict is not resolved, how can we talk about the opening of communications? If the conflict is not resolved, why do the deputy prime ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia meet and agree? (The Azeri Times, 13/05/2021)*

Actually rhetorical questions and repetitions are abundant in this speech, i.e. repetition of “*If the conflict is not resolved*” reinforces his idea on the issue. Rhetorical questions are used to prove the truth of his words as well as to ensure the audience that the conflict has been resolved.

In another excerpt the president's speech is more aggressive:

*As for what some politicians say about the status of Nagorno-Karabakh – a non-existent entity. I spoke about this too, if someone wants to give status to the Armenians living in our territory, I do not mind, let them choose a good place for them in their country.*

*Those places have long been captured by the Armenian diaspora, so they should give them autonomy or independence there. But not in Azerbaijan. This will not happen in Azerbaijan, regardless of what anyone says. (The Azeri Times, 13/05/2021)*

In this excerpt the speechmaker uses the pronoun of the first person “I” to present his “self” and his own point of view, while emphasizing the “power” of

what he says. According to conflict theorists, the power illustrated here is the ‘power over’, which corrupts and is a source of social conflict rather than integration (Lenski, 1966; Sassenberg et al., 2014).

The president wants to express his power over Armenians and he goes on speaking about them without mentioning the nation’s or the country’s name: just referring to them as ‘they’. His speech becomes more and more aggressive and he wants to see Karabakh without Armenians.

*Therefore, I advise, in order not to anger us and not strain our relationship, not to make any statements either about the status of Nagorno-Karabakh or about the conflict. If they carry on making them, they will receive an answer”, said Ilham Aliyev. “They should not play with fire”. (The Azeri Times, 13/05/2021)*

In the same interview the president of Azerbaijan declares: “Both Armenian opposition and those in power make statements about the return of Shusha and Hadrut.” His reaction to this statement is another illustration of Azerbaijani military power over Armenians:

*We are showing endurance so far. But they should not play with fire. They saw our fist and it is still clenched. No one can stand before us. If we notice the slightest danger, even the slightest, we will immediately destroy it. Directly and locally. They know it. We have both strength, will, and determination. The fist is in its place. (The Azeri Times, 13/05/2021)*

The use of “we” and “us” instead of “I” and “my” is aimed at representing himself and the nation the Azerbaijani leader belongs to. Here the politician wants to express his solidarity with his nation, to act on their behalf and to protect their national interests.

Ilham Aliyev’s speeches are full of threatening expressions, illustrating their military power over Armenians:

*If we notice the slightest danger, even the slightest, we will immediately destroy it. Directly and locally; The fist is in its place; They saw our fist and it is still clenched; No one can stand before us. (The Azeri Times, 13/05/2021)*

Azerbaijan announces plans to build a transmission line through Armenia. They want to connect Nakhijevan to the rest of Azerbaijan through the southern Armenian province of Syunik, which Azerbaijanis call Zangezur. The Armenian side, however, has repeatedly denied being involved in negotiations for the provision of a corridor to Azerbaijan, stressing that they have only agreed to unblock transport communications in the region.

The president of Azerbaijan says: *“The Zangezur corridor” is not only a railway, but a road and an air route.*”

*“We will fulfill the task of implementing the Zangezur corridor, whether Armenia wants it or not. If Armenia wants, it can be solved simply, if it does not want, we will solve it by force. I said before the war and during the war that they must leave our land of their own free will, or we will throw them out. And so it happened. The same will happen with the Zangezur corridor. The Azerbaijani people will return to the captured Zangezur after 101 years,”* Aliyev said. *“Zangezur corridor should be opened and will be opened”*, he added. (The Azeri Times, 13/05/2021)

Armenophobia and a policy of hatred is obvious in Aliyev’s speeches. In the above excerpt the speaker uses the modal verbs *must* (*must leave*) and *should* (*should be opened*) to show that it is necessary and very important for them to fulfill their plans in the nearest future. The use of the future tense form with “will” such as: *we will solve it, we will throw them out, the same will happen, will return, will be opened*, expresses the politician’s intentions to capture ancient Armenian province Syunik (which together with Sevan and Yerevan were declared as Azerbaijanis lands by their leader). He is certain to take the lands by force and has already planned his actions. Aliyev’s statement on the Zangezur corridor and threats against the Armenian population prove Azerbaijanis genocidal policy towards Armenians.

### **Russian – Ukrainian conflict**

Another ongoing and protracted conflict between Russia and Ukraine had started in February 2014 and turned into a disastrous war on February 24, 2022. Relations between the two countries have been hostile since 2014 following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity.

In 2014 Ukraine's elected president Viktor Yanukovich and his supporters were removed from power in response to his refusal to sign a political association and free-trade agreement with the EU that enjoyed majority support in Ukraine's parliament.

Ukraine's post-revolutionary government wished to join both the EU and NATO in nearest future, rather than continue to play the delicate diplomatic game of balancing its own economic and security interests with those of Russia, the EU, and NATO member states. Ukraine's becoming a member of NATO could restrict Russia's access to the Black Sea.

These two states were finally made enemies after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the creation of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic in areas of eastern Ukraine where there is an ethnic Russian majority.

In 2019, amendments were made to the Constitution of Ukraine, which enshrined the irreversibility of the country's strategic course towards EU and NATO membership. Throughout 2021 and 2022, a Russian military buildup on the border of Ukraine escalated tensions between the two countries and strained their bilateral relations bringing to a war.

The analysis of the research material reveals that, in fact, the conflict is mainly between two main forces:

*The reality is that the world's two top nuclear powers are dueling out their most tense test of wills since the fall of the Soviet Union. A Russian invasion of Ukraine could trigger the biggest clash of regular conventional armies in Europe since World War II. At stake for Americans are the credibility of the West, perceptions of US global power and the possibility of secondary consequences that hit hard at home, for instance, a crisis-fueled spike in energy prices. (CNNPolitics, 21/01/2022)*

Another media source, "Independent", interprets this conflict as follows:

*President Joe Biden, backed by the full symbolic power of the Western alliance, is locked in a showdown with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is using Ukraine as a hostage to try to force the US to renegotiate the settled outcome of the Cold War. Neither man is blinking. To do so*



*may be unfeasible, given the huge political stakes both have wagered.* (Independent, 11/03/2022)

They accuse each other of using Ukraine to fulfill their political demands. In the excerpt above American authors of the article claim that “*Russian President Vladimir Putin is using Ukraine as a hostage*“, whereas in another article Vladimir Putin warns that “*the West is using Ukraine as “a theater of potential warfare” against Russia*” (The Washington Post, 22/02/2022).

The president of Russia uses these metaphorical expressions to describe Ukraine as “*a puppet state of the West*” and warns that the country can develop its own nuclear weapons, calling this a “real threat” that the West might help Kyiv to achieve. “*Ukraine*”, he said, was “*a colony with puppets at its helm,*” where Russian speakers were oppressed” (The Washington Post, 22/02/2022).

It is worth mentioning here that theatricality is one of the main features of political discourse. Theatricality of a political discourse is connected with the fact that one of the parties of communication - the people - carries out not a role of the direct addressee, but the observer addressee who perceives the current political events as the certain performance played for them with a fascinating plot and the unpredictable end (Kenzhekanova, 2015). Having this definition in mind, we can claim that Vladimir Putin’s qualifications “*a theater of potential warfare*”, “*a colony with puppets at its helm,*” come to prove his firm belief that the Ukrainians and their authorities are participating in a play staged by the US against the Russians.

As the development of events is not in favor of Russians, their vocabulary becomes more and more aggressive day by day. Different points of view of the West and Russia on the issue deepen the conflict. Western countries considered unacceptable a number of Moscow's demands; mainly the refusal of the NATO defense alliance to admit Ukraine as a member, and the reduction of their military presence in Eastern Europe. Russians feel that the level of threat for their country is becoming “*greater and greater*” as Putin states. He warns:

*Russia has every right to take countermeasures to enhance our security, and that’s how we plan to act.* (The Washington Post, 22/02/2022)

“*You want decommunization? That completely works for us. We are prepared to show what real decommunization means for Ukraine*”, Vladimir Putin said, appearing to suggest that he might seek to dismantle the country.

*“NATO completely ignores our protests,”* he added, alluding to his demand for a guarantee that Ukraine never be allowed to join the transatlantic alliance. *“They spit on them and do whatever they want”* (The Washington Post, 22/02/2022).

In this excerpt Putin’s harsh words are also a kind of manifestation of his power. The latter is recognized by the other conflicting side and this is the reason that they want to prove Russia’s being a threat to humanity.

*“We face a blatant attempt to overwrite the rules of the international order,”* the president of the European Commission von der Leyen said. *“This is what the Kremlin policies mean in practice. Kremlin policy is to ‘install fear’”*.

The speaker wants to illustrate the evilness and aggression of the opposing side by using the attribute blatant (attempt) which shows that everything is done or said openly and unashamedly by Putin and his representatives and assures the audience that Russians *‘install fear’*.

In another article, the author Anthony Faiola uses the expression ‘killer frost’:

*On the fertile plains of Ukraine, the resurgent echoes of a Cold War with Russia is in danger of becoming a ‘killer frost’.* (The Washington Post, 07/01/2022)

*Killer Frost* is a name used by several female supervillains and superheroes appearing in comic books published by DC Comics: Crystal Frost, Louise Lincoln, and Caitlin Snow. Each different individual in the DC Universe assuming the Killer Frost persona usually has some connection to the superhero Firestorm. However, the important point to mention is the fact that according to the tale (first appearing in *Firestorm* #3, June 1978), the heroine began her murderous crusade against men and clashed with Firestorm on many occasions. Killer Frost eventually died after she absorbed too much energy from Firestorm. Perhaps, the author wants to present the horrible scenario of the conflict with this metaphorical expression.

Another politician, Stoltenberg notices: *“Moscow is attempting to roll back history and recreate its spheres of influence”, and he calls on Russia to ‘step back from the brink’ warning that a new dangerous situation is about to begin.*

*“It is not too late for Russia to change course, to step back from the brink, stop preparing for war and to start working for a peaceful resolution”,* Stoltenberg said.

The use of the infinitive in this context can be considered as a kind of warning for Russians to avoid a devastating conflict in Ukraine. However, the political figure does not use modal words like *would*, *should*, *must*, etc. and seeks to be polite so as not to complicate the situation.

As already mentioned, the use of modal verbs and modal expressions by politicians has the intention of coercion and command. Their application makes the speech of politicians more demanding and aggressive:

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen vowed that Europe and its partners will express their solidarity with Ukraine: “*We can impose high costs and severe consequences on Moscow's economic interests. The Kremlin's strange thinking that comes straight out of a dark past may cost Russia a prosperous future*”.

Calling an invasion “*tragic and futile*”, the UK Prime Minister said of Vladimir Putin: “*can we allow him to believe that he would be able to take some smaller slice of Ukraine?*” (Independent, 25/01/2022).

Another linguistic strategy which politicians often use in an argument is the employment of conditionals. Our survey reveals that the conflicting sides mainly use type 1 conditionals, when both a possible condition and its probable result are mentioned.

*So if the Kremlin aims to have less NATO on its borders, it will only get more NATO in case of a war in Ukraine,- said the NATO chief. (Oelofse, 19/02/2022)*

In this statement the NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg is trying to signal to Russia that they are not going to meet Putin's demands. Moreover, they will send more forces to Ukraine and its bordering countries. The use of the simple present tense in the conditional clause and simple future tense in the main clause represents possible future occurrences of confrontation between the NATO countries and Russia. The conditional sentence is also used to express the speaker's firm and frustrated tone and illustrate the NATO's consistent and *unwavering policy towards Kremlin. In addition, the metonymic use of Kremlin instead of Russia and Russian government is also a device to intensify his intentions towards the other conflicting side, to prove that the main player on the political stage is Putin and his surrounding, whose seat is in Kremlin.*

## Conclusion

*Our survey of different* articles, political speeches, debates collected from mass media enabled us to understand the main causes and consequences of political conflicts which in both cases (Armenian – Azerbaijani; Russian – Ukrainian) refer to national interest and national identities of all conflicting sides as well as their future development and security. We noticed the manifestation of power by words and deeds from all conflicting sides. Azerbaijani leader’s discourse was aimed at illustrating his power over Armenians. In aforementioned excerpts he revealed his genocidal policy towards Armenians.

In Russian – Ukrainian conflict the most powerful leaders of the world were involved. The analyses of their speeches led us to the conclusion that conflicting sides were trying to illustrate their power over each other.

The study of the language of conflicting politicians from different linguistic perspectives revealed several linguistic strategies which were used by them to illustrate their power over the others. The latter was first of all expressed by the use of aggressive vocabulary in their speeches. The analysis also exposed an emphasis on strategic use of metaphors, metonymies. The choice of the pronouns and the use of conditional sentences gave extra strength to the words of politicians.

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## ՈՒԺԻ ԼԵԶՈՒՆ ՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆ ՀԱԿԱՄԱՐՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐՈՒՄ

### Անահիտ Գալստյան

Լեզվի ուժը դրսևորվում է, հատկապես, տարբեր ազգերի միջև եղած հակամարտությունների ընթացքում: Երբեմն դրանք կառավարելի են, երբեմն էլ այդ հակամարտություններն անլուծելի են թվում, քանզի յուրաքանչյուր հակամարտող կողմ առաջ է քաշում իր տեսակետը՝ խոսելով ուժի դիրքերից: Արդյո՞ք հակամարտող կողմերից մեկը հակված է դրսևորել իր գերակայությունը մյուսի նկատմամբ: Ինչպե՞ս է քաղաքական դիսկուրսում արտահայտվում մի հակամարտող կողմի ռազմաքաղաքական առավելությունը մյուսի նկատմամբ:

Հոդվածում փորձ է արվում պատասխանել վերը նշված, ինչպես նաև մի շարք այլ հարցերի: Ուսումնասիրության լեզվական նյութը հայ-ադրբեջանական և ռուս-ուկրաինական հակամարտությունների վերաբերյալ քաղաքական գործիչների բանավեճերն են, հարցազրույցները, ելույթները, քաղաքական հոդվածները: Քաղաքական դիսկուրսում կիրառվող լեզվական միջոցների ուսումնասիրությունը լեզվաբանական տարբեր տեսանկյուններից բացահայտում է մի քանի ռազմավարություն՝ ազդեցիկ բառապաշարը, դերանունների ընտրությունը, պայմանական նախադասությունների, ինչպես նաև փոխաբերությունների, փոխանունների և այլ ոճաբանական հնարների լայն կիրառությունը:

*Բանալի բառեր՝ հայ-ադրբեջանական հակամարտություն, ռուս-ուկրաինական հակամարտություն, ռազմաքաղաքական ուժի դրսևորումը լեզվում, քաղաքական դիսկուրս:*