

Taking Language Seriously: The effect of language on conflicts and foreign policies

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Language matters in International Relations and Security Studies research. Some use rhetoric to figure out states' intentions. Others use official statements and declaratory policies to evaluate states' strategic plans and goals. Still more use language to study propaganda, framing, and signaling. Yet, despite the importance of language, it is rare to see analyses on particular words or concepts and how they may influence foreign policies and conflict dynamics and outcomes. In this memo, I provide examples to show how the choice of description can influence foreign policies and how differences in conceptual understanding can drive conflicts between states. Then, I suggest three ways scholars may treat language seriously and contribute to policy.

The importance of language

It comes as no surprise that language frames and orients our thinking (Howard 2004; Shimko 1994; Stone 1994). Pelopidas (2011) argues that because US nuclear weapons scholars and policymakers describe nuclear history as “a history of nuclear weapons proliferation”, the persistent fear of the “N+1 country” problem has led experts to adopt a conservative stance by advocating more of the same policies. Importantly, by using the term ‘proliferation’, which implies, among others, “a chain reaction”, policymakers have assumed that regional nuclear cascades will happen when the history of nuclear proliferation continues to contradict this expectation.

In a different example, Peh and Park (2021) suggest that because the US describes North Korea as a rogue state, a pariah, and a criminal state, the default foreign policy approach is to reject any form of engagement and to revert to a policy of punishments (e.g. sanctions) once crises de-escalate through negotiations (see also Sigal 1998). Policy research has sometimes paid attention to the choice of words. However, like Peh and Park (2021), scholars have more often used language as a tool to study frames and sentiment (e.g. Fisher, Klein, and Codjo 2022). The independent effect of words on mechanisms like framing is less studied, and the choice of words and the reasons motivating these choices are still less intensively questioned.

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Language is arguably even more crucial when discussed in inter-state, cross-linguistic, or cross-cultural contexts. Differences in languages can lead to crises and misunderstandings, and these differences can stem from at least two sources: an intentional effort at targeting different audiences, and a poor understanding of each other's worldviews or concerns. In a recent study, Mokry (2022) finds that China's Chinese-language statements differ from their official English-language translations, sometimes substantively and substantially. Analyzing texts intended for different audiences, specifically domestic and international, can, thus, be important for understanding how states mobilize citizens or shape citizens' views towards certain international issues (Wang 2021)—while maintaining a façade of compliance or agreement with international rules and norms.

With the intensification of major power competition, more research has been dedicated to understanding China's view on war and warfare and, especially, deterrence. Li (2015) explains at least eight differences between the US's and China's thinking on security-related issues. Specifically, on deterrence, he notes that China does not believe “deterrence and compellence [to be] distinguishable” under certain conditions. As such, China “worr[ies] about the compellent effects”, that is, the initiation of conflicts by nuclear weapons states while using their “possession of nuclear weapons to dissuade a conventional counterattack”. In China's view, deterrence is therefore an offensive strategy which gives nuclear weapons states a strong advantage in limiting their adversaries' options. Put more forcefully, it is a strategy to get the target state to “submit” (Cheng 2012). This view has significant implications for the US, which sees deterrence as a defensive concept. In terms of signaling, for example, efforts which use deterrence threats to warn China against escalation would unlikely be effective since Beijing will likely (mis)interpret these threats as aggression (see also Arenson 2020).

Such differences exist not only between adversaries. Between allies, reassurance strategies may be ineffective, too, because of how policies are described. Lyon (2019) notes that some US policymakers are reluctant to include the word ‘nuclear’ in the term ‘extended deterrence’ because the policy can involve “a spectrum of capabilities rather than mere nuclear threats”. However, the exclusion of the word is sometimes regarded as a form of abandonment by allies. While seemingly petty, the choice of words and differences in states' understanding of key

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strategic concepts are nontrivial matters. In deterrence, language can be particularly consequential when much of the policy rests on “get[ting] into the head” of one’s adversaries (Arenson 2020) and communicating resolve to both allies and adversaries (Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al. 2021).

Three ways to study the role of language

Based on the above discussion, I propose three ways which scholars may facilitate policymaking. First, academic research can examine how policymakers describe issues, why they are described as such, and how such description shapes policy outcomes or exclude others. Pelopidas (2011), for example, suggests that because of the entrenched view from describing nuclear threats as proliferation, cases which evidence the absence of proliferation are seen as anomalies. Thus, despite the scarcity of proliferation states and successes, “when nuclear weapons were not found in Iraq in 2003, the first reaction of the experts was not to contemplate absence but rather to build scenarios in which the weapons could have been transferred to Syria or destroyed just before the US invasion.” By drawing attention to biases and other implications that may follow from such description, scholars may improve policymaking by cautioning against the development of a tunnel vision and proposing instead solutions that might be cast aside due to the lens provided by the adopted terms and descriptions.

Second, research can focus on describing how different states conceptualize ideas, policies, and strategies. Such descriptive efforts are important because these descriptions will form part of the foundation for understanding state behaviors and strategies. They may also help advance research by allowing scholars from different parts of the world to better speak to one another and build on the other’s ideas and findings. In conflict research, for example, scholars and practitioners have found it hard to use terms like ‘justice’ universally because the same ideas may not exist in certain countries, and related concepts may have connotations and valence that lead local communities to view the idea negatively. As such, better descriptions of ideas and policies which have global implications are an important research area. Relatedly, scholars may also study the effects of differences in language and conceptual understanding. Within countries, these understandings may change overtime and hence, explain shifts in countries’ policies at

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different time periods (e.g. Li 2015 on China's approach towards sanctions and nonproliferation). Across countries, such research may also explain successes and failures in areas where communication is key, such as, signaling and negotiation.

Finally, scholars from different parts of the world may also develop joint projects to come up with new concepts to better capture cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences. These projects can serve as "an effective instrument of peace" (Miller 2006) by building relationships and maintaining communication among states and providing policymakers with new frameworks and tools, which can be especially beneficial now as dialogues between major powers become increasingly difficult.

Conclusion

In this memo, I emphasized that language is important because it can limit foreign policy options and drive conflicts, be it due to intentional efforts to influence citizens' view on an international issue or misunderstandings stemming from a poor understanding of each other's worldviews and concerns. The academic community is uniquely well-placed to address these issues because scholars can devote attention to investigating how descriptions may affect policy discussions and how to prevent the related pitfalls. Such critical thinking would be particularly unlikely among policymakers who are part of the team which conceived of or continued the use of these terms and especially not if they are the ones coming up with terms while trying to address new and urgent issues. By generating new concepts or showing how concepts may be understood differently across contexts and, indeed, affect such outcomes as negotiations and conflict escalation, scholars and cross-country research can also mitigate, hopefully, a source of misunderstanding and conflict.

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