

Misinterpretation of Diplomatic Language and Conflict Escalation: A Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Four International Crises

Najib Najjar

Department of English, Languages and Translation, Notre Dame University, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon

Nehme Al Khawly

Department of Government and International Relations, Notre Dame University, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon

Maya El Hajj

Department of English, Languages and Translation, Notre Dame University, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon

May Akl

Department of English, Languages and Translation, Notre Dame University, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon

Anthony Nakhle

Institut des Sciences Politiques, Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth, Beyrouth, Lebanon

Abstract—Diplomatic crises are commonly examined through strategic or institutional frameworks, yet the role of linguistic interpretation in shaping escalation dynamics remains under-theorized. This article analyzes how misinterpretation of diplomatic language contributes to conflict escalation through a comparative qualitative study of four international crises: the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the Iraq War (2003), the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2014), and the Israel-Hamas war (2023-2024). Drawing on speech act theory, pragmatics, intercultural communication, practice theory, signaling theory, and translation studies, the analysis traces how illocutionary intent, pragmatic inference, diplomatic repertoires, and cross-linguistic mediation interact under strategic uncertainty. Across cases, the findings reveal recurrent patterns of communicative breakdown, including misalignment between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, failures of diplomatic recognition, and meaning shifts introduced through translation. The article conceptualizes miscommunication as a structural feature of crisis diplomacy and highlights the central role of language and mediation in shaping escalation and restraint.

Index Terms—diplomatic language, miscommunication, conflict escalation, pragmatics, translation

I. INTRODUCTION

In international diplomacy, language is never neutral: subtle choices in wording, register, and tone can alter perceptions and escalate crises. From the Cold War to contemporary conflicts, confrontations were shaped by linguistic interpretation alongside material power and strategic interest.

This study addresses that gap by combining linguistic and diplomatic approaches. It draws on speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), pragmatics (Levinson, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987), intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 2004), and genre/register approaches to diplomatic discourse (Holtsova & Khodarchenko, 2021), alongside practice theory (Pouliot, 2008; Faizullaev, 2017) and signaling theory (Crawford & Sobel, 1982; Trager, 2017; Takei, 2024).

To illustrate these dynamics, the article analyzes four cases where linguistic misinterpretation influenced escalation: the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the Iraq War (2003), the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2014), and the Israel-Hamas war (2023-2024). Across these cases, terms, metaphors, and rhetorical framing carried incompatible meanings across audiences, shaping divergent interpretations of intent.

This study asks how misinterpretations of diplomatic language, including those shaped by translation and interpretation, contribute to the escalation of international conflict. It examines what recurring patterns of linguistic misalignment emerge across major crises and what these patterns reveal about the role of communication in escalation and restraint. In doing so, the article contributes to the study of language and politics by showing how speech acts, pragmatic inference, and translation practices shape the construction, circulation, and contestation of political meaning in crisis contexts. The analysis therefore approaches diplomatic discourse as a central site in which political meaning is constructed, contested, and negotiated in crisis.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research shows that diplomatic interactions rely on linguistic precision, yet even minor ambiguities can affect escalation. Political rhetoric often relies on strategic vagueness to preserve flexibility, yet it can backfire when interpreted through incompatible cultural or institutional lenses (Chilton, 2004; Wodak, 2009).

Speech Act Theory and pragmatics provide a basis for analyzing these dynamics. Illocutionary acts such as threats, promises, and declarations can generate different perlocutionary effects depending on context, audience, and background assumptions (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; House & Kádár, 2021). In high-stakes crises, implicature, presupposition, deixis, and hedging often shape interpretation as much as literal wording, especially where political actors rely on ambiguity, plausible deniability, or ideologically charged framing (Hall, 1989; Cap, 2017; Zaczynska et al., 2024). Cultural schemas and genre expectations further complicate uptake, since concepts such as honor, resistance, sovereignty, or liberation do not travel evenly across political communities and communicative settings (Mazraani, 1995; Barkho, 2010; Hodges, 2011; Kamyans, 2024; Iqbal & Farukh, 2025).

Research on diplomatic practice and signaling adds a further dimension by showing that communication depends on wording and shared expectations about legitimacy, credibility, and appropriate diplomatic conduct (Pouliot, 2008; Faizullaev, 2017; Crawford & Sobel, 1982; Trager, 2017; Takei, 2024). Translation studies likewise demonstrate that diplomatic meaning is actively mediated, not mechanically transferred: translators and interpreters reshape tone, force, and framing as they move discourse across linguistic and political contexts (Agildere, 2009; Nida, 1964; Vermeer, 1989; Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984; Yang et al., 2025; Yang, 2012). While prior research has examined these processes in individual conflicts, fewer studies compare them systematically across multiple crises through a single integrated framework.

Recent studies have extended these arguments by demonstrating that disagreement in United Nations Security Council speech is frequently implicit, that diplomatic translations can transform linguistic, cultural, and communicative meaning, and that wartime translation can function as a form of gatekeeping and reframing (Kamyans, 2024; Yang et al., 2025; Zaczynska et al., 2024). Contemporary diplomatic practice also unfolds in a more fragmented and conflictual communicative environment, while the credibility of public and private threats remains conditional on institutional and domestic settings (Lafont Rapnouil, 2024; Takei, 2024).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on insights from linguistics, diplomacy, and translation studies to organize the concepts reviewed above into a single analytical framework for the case studies. At the linguistic level, Speech Act Theory and pragmatics explain how diplomatic utterances function as threats, reassurances, offers, or warnings whose force depends on context, inference, and audience uptake (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Levinson, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Intercultural communication and genre/register approaches extend this analysis by showing how cultural norms and institutional forms shape what counts as appropriate, credible, or intelligible diplomatic discourse (Gudykunst, 2004; Holtsova & Khodarchenko, 2021).

To capture diplomacy as social practice and strategic interaction, the framework also draws on Practice Theory and signaling theory. These perspectives show how speech acts gain or lose credibility within shared repertoires of diplomatic conduct and how ambiguity becomes dangerous when actors do not recognize the same norms of legitimacy, obligation, or commitment (Pouliot, 2008; Faizullaev, 2017; Crawford & Sobel, 1982; Trager, 2017; Takei, 2024). Because much diplomatic discourse is mediated across languages, the framework further incorporates translation and interpretation theories, particularly dynamic equivalence, Skopos theory, and sense theory, in order to trace how cross-linguistic mediation can reshape tone, emphasis, illocutionary force, and inferred meaning (Nida, 1964; Vermeer, 1989; Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984; Yang et al., 2025; Yang, 2012). Together, these concepts provide the analytical structure for examining how meaning is constructed, distorted, and reinterpreted in high-stakes diplomatic communication.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine how diplomatic language is interpreted, misinterpreted, and mediated across four international crises: the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the Iraq War (2003), the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2014), and the Israel-Hamas war (2023-2024). The cases were selected purposively because each involved a high-stakes diplomatic confrontation in which linguistic misalignment contributed to escalation, each offers accessible primary linguistic material for analysis, and each provides comparative value across different cultural and linguistic settings (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006; Flyvbjerg, 2006; House & Kádár, 2021; Yang et al., 2025; Cap, 2017). The comparison is therefore analytical rather than historical, focusing on shared communicative mechanisms rather than substantive geopolitical similarity.

The study analyzes publicly available diplomatic texts, including speeches, statements, correspondence, and UN discourse. The analysis combines speech act theory, pragmatics, genre/register analysis, practice theory, signaling theory, and translation theory to examine how diplomatic utterances gain force and shift across audiences in multilingual settings (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Levinson, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Zaczynska et al., 2024; Holtsova & Khodarchenko, 2021; Pouliot, 2008; Faizullaev, 2017; Crawford & Sobel, 1982; Trager, 2017; Takei, 2024;

Nida, 1964; Vermeer, 1989; Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984; Yang et al., 2025). The analysis proceeded in three stages: key texts were selected at points of escalatory significance; the texts were coded through a hybrid strategy combining theory-driven categories with inductive attention to case-specific patterns; and the coded materials were then compared across cases to identify recurring mechanisms linking linguistic misalignment to crisis escalation. Table 1 provides a comparative overview of the four cases before the detailed case analyses.

TABLE 1
COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF LINGUISTIC, DIPLOMATIC, AND TRANSLATIONAL DYNAMICS ACROSS FOUR CRISES

Case	Key Linguistic Factors	Key Diplomatic / Signaling Factors	Key Translation / Interpretation Factors	Consequences
1. Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)	Strategic ambiguity; conflicting illocutionary force; metacommunication failures; pragmatic hedging.	Conflicting signals (conciliatory vs. aggressive letters); credibility uncertainty; backchannel vs. official communication.	Translation shifts between Russian and English altered tone; terms such as “quarantine” and “blockade” carried different legal implications.	Near-nuclear escalation; misread intentions; policy paralysis.
2. Iraq War (2003)	Vagueness; presupposition; hedging in WMD claims; misread cultural metaphors (honor, resistance).	U.S. credibility framing; intelligence discourse; ultimatum speech acts.	Arabic-English translations reduced pragmatic nuance; Western mistranslations amplified threat perception.	Justification for invasion; diplomatic deadlock; erosion of trust.
3. Russia-Ukraine Conflict (2014)	Competing narratives; deixis (“our people”); semantic divergence (“federalization”); ideological metaphors.	Hybrid signaling; plausible deniability; misaligned expectations in Minsk agreements.	Russian-English/Ukrainian translations produced political non-equivalence; key terms lacked shared sense.	Polarized perceptions; failed agreements; escalation of hybrid warfare.
4. Israel-Hamas War (2023-2024)	Performative failures; conflicting illocutionary force; direct vs. indirect styles; emotionally loaded metaphors.	Humanitarian diplomacy breakdown; contradictory public and private messages; credibility contestation.	Arabic metaphors (“Al-Aqsa Flood”); mistranslations of Israeli evacuation warnings; UN/NGO interpretation inconsistencies.	Catastrophic escalation; collapse of communication channels.

V. RESULTS

A. Case 1: The Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a thirteen-day confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union over the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba. The crisis brought the world to the brink of nuclear conflict. Communication between Washington and Moscow involved formal speeches, United Nations statements, backchannel exchanges, and personal letters whose distinct tones, rhetorical strategies, and translation challenges shaped perceptions of intent and risk.

The crisis was significantly influenced by pragmatic misalignment between Washington and Moscow (Allison, 1971; Lebow & Stein, 1994). From the perspective of Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), language functioned as a tool of coercive action rather than a neutral medium of communication. President John F. Kennedy’s televised address on October 22, 1962, exemplifies this performative dimension. While rhetorically framed as a defensive response, the announcement of a “quarantine” around Cuba operated as an indirect ultimatum, carrying the illocutionary force of a directive speech act. Kennedy’s declaration that any missile launched from Cuba would be regarded as an attack by the Soviet Union also produced a calculated perlocutionary effect intended to project resolve, deter Soviet action, and constrain further escalation (Sorensen, 1965). Khrushchev’s correspondence with Kennedy similarly reveals notable illocutionary inconsistency. His initial letter, sent on October 26, adopted a conciliatory and commissive tone, proposing the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba in exchange for a U.S. pledge not to invade the island. His second letter, delivered on October 27 and influenced by internal Soviet political dynamics, shifted abruptly to a more assertive stance by conditioning Soviet compliance on the removal of U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey. This abrupt shift in speech act type and register generated interpretive ambiguity for U.S. policymakers, who struggled to discern which message conveyed the authoritative Soviet position (Fursenko & Naftali, 1997).

Pragmatic elements such as implicature, presupposition, hedging, and lexical choice added further complexity. Kennedy’s deliberate use of the term “quarantine” in place of “blockade” functioned as a strategic ambiguity intended to avoid the legal implications of an act of war under international law while still conveying a credible deterrent posture (May & Zelikow, 2001). In contrast, Khrushchev’s repeated invocation of “peace-loving peoples” presupposed Soviet moral legitimacy and implicitly framed U.S. actions as manifestations of imperial aggression. Intercultural communication frameworks further illuminate this divergence. U.S. diplomatic rhetoric was grounded in legalistic and security-oriented language that prioritized deterrence, credibility, and hemispheric defense, whereas Soviet discourse drew on collectivist and ideological narratives centered on socialist solidarity and the experience of geopolitical encirclement (Lebow & Stein, 1994). This clash of communicative logics produced semantic asymmetries, particularly in the interpretation of terms such as “freedom,” “security,” and “defensive measures,” thereby heightening the risk of escalation.

A practice-theoretical lens shows that the crisis also unfolded through a clash of diplomatic repertoires, status claims, and legitimacy struggles. In the public sphere, U.S. officials followed a familiar script built around an OAS-supported quarantine and carefully calibrated statements, while in private they relied on coordinated backchannel messaging to maintain credibility and reduce uncertainty. By contrast, the Soviet approach shifted between personal, emotional letters and impersonal, ideologically heavy statements. This inconsistency in tone and format complicated judgments about which exchanges communicated authoritative intent. Khrushchev's two letters created confusion in the White House: the first's informal and emotional nature made it appear less official, while the second's tougher and more formal stance implied a different negotiating baseline. Following Robert Kennedy's meeting with Ambassador Dobrynin, the United States chose to respond only to the first letter as a form of "practiced repair" (Pouliot, 2008), bringing both sides back to a more coherent negotiating track and facilitating de-escalation. Signaling theory clarifies this dynamic further. Kennedy's "quarantine" did not impose major immediate material costs, yet it still carried credibility because the institutional setting, audience costs, and U.S. reputational stakes made follow-through plausible. By contrast, Khrushchev's decision to send two letters aimed at different audiences weakened the clarity of the Soviet stance. At the same time, costless statements can still communicate credibility when they occur within repeated interactions and institutionally facilitated visibility in behavior (Trager, 2017; Takei, 2024). Both sides therefore crafted parallel, face-saving accounts that allowed domestic audiences to interpret events without public contradiction.

Translation was also essential to the crisis. All major communications passed through Russian-English or English-Russian mediation, and subtle translation choices affected pragmatic force, emotional tone, and the construction of intended meaning. Khrushchev's first letter included culturally specific metaphors and idiomatic expressions such as "rash" (опрометчивый) and "evil genius" (злой гений), whose English renderings reduced some of the original emotional force (May & Zelikow, 2001). Following Sense Theory, translators reconstruct meaning on a conceptual rather than lexical level (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984), which may have tempered the force of Khrushchev's emotional appeals for U.S. officials. Dynamic Equivalence Theory (Nida, 1964) also helps explain the lack of equivalence in Kennedy's use of "quarantine" rather than "blockade," since available Russian renderings were closer to *blokada* and therefore reinforced the Soviet reading of hostile intent. This was a failure of pragmatic equivalence rather than a simple lexical shift, as the U.S. attempt to signal restraint was not conveyed with the same subtlety. Genre and register discrepancies were further intensified by translation. Khrushchev's first letter, informal and story-driven in Russian, lost much of its interpersonal tone in English, making it appear less authoritative to Kennedy's advisers. Conversely, Soviet translations of U.S. communications emphasized legalistic precision, which may have made Kennedy's rhetoric seem more rigid and dogmatic. During the secret RFK-Dobrynin backchannel meeting, interpreters also played a crucial mediating role in conveying implicit commitments such as the quiet removal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey across language boundaries. Translation was an active participant rather than a passive mediator in shaping how intentions were constructed, how credibility was judged, and how risks of escalation were managed (Yang et al., 2025; Yang, 2012).

These communicative dynamics interacted with the material and institutional conditions of the crisis, including the deployment of nuclear weapons, military readiness, alliance commitments, and the risk of unauthorized escalation. Linguistic ambiguity therefore shaped how decision-makers interpreted and managed an already dangerous strategic confrontation, while the availability of backchannels and reciprocal incentives for restraint created opportunities for communicative repair (Allison, 1971; Fursenko & Naftali, 1997; May & Zelikow, 2001).

B. Case 2: The Iraq War (2003)

The 2003 invasion of Iraq emerged from escalating hostilities over suspected weapons of mass destruction and U.S. post-9/11 security strategy (Stieb, 2023). The path to war was shaped by imprecise phrasing, UN rhetoric, and divergent interpretations of Iraqi discourse.

Linguistic miscommunication and intercultural misunderstanding played a central role in the breakdown of dialogue between the Iraqi leadership and U.S. political and intelligence actors before the invasion (Chilton, 2004; Hodges, 2011). Viewed through Speech Act Theory, President George W. Bush's March 17, 2003 address functioned as a decisive directive: by demanding that Saddam Hussein and his sons leave Iraq within 48 hours, the statement issued an ultimatum that left little room for negotiation. Its performative force framed military action as a foregone conclusion and signaled the termination of diplomatic engagement (Mazraani, 1995). Saddam Hussein's televised address, broadcast on Al-Jazeera, relied instead on assertive and commissive speech acts grounded in metaphors of honor, bravery, sacrifice, and resilience. Statements such as "We will fight any aggression with the courage and honor of the Iraqi people" carried strong pragmatic force within Arab political discourse, where such rhetoric is associated with legitimacy and national dignity, yet were often received through a Western lens as defiant or evasive (Barkho, 2010). Strategic ambiguity also shaped U.S. rhetorical framing before the war. In his February 2003 address to the United Nations, Secretary of State Colin Powell used epistemic modal verbs such as "may," "might," and "could," alongside hedged expressions referring to Iraq's "capability to develop WMDs," rather than definitive proof (Chilton, 2004; Zarefsky, 2007). Yet the authority of the UN setting lent these formulations an implicature of certainty, encouraging media and public audiences to hear probabilistic language as factual confirmation. Presuppositions embedded in claims such as "Iraq continues to harbor terrorists" further positioned guilt as already established, narrowing the space for alternative interpretation or critical scrutiny (Hodges, 2011).

Intercultural framing intensified the divide between U.S. and Arab political discourse. American rhetoric foregrounded liberation, preemption, and global security, while Arab political communication emphasized sovereignty, dignity (كرامة), resistance (مقاومة), and martyrdom (شهادة) (Mazraani, 1995). This divergence was especially visible in translation: the U.S. narrative of “liberating Iraq” was frequently rendered in Arab media as الاحتلال (“occupation”), fundamentally altering the pragmatic force of the original message (Barkho, 2010). These semantic asymmetries were reinforced by mismatches of genre and register. U.S. officials relied on military-legal formulations such as “coalition of the willing” and “shock and awe” to project authority and strategic readiness, whereas Iraqi political language drew on poetic and nationalist registers, while United Nations discourse maintained humanitarian and legalistic conventions (Barkho, 2010). In the absence of a shared diplomatic register, inferential coherence broke down.

The Iraq case also reflects a collapse in shared diplomatic routines and credibility structures, as described by practice theory and signaling theory (Pouliot, 2008; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015). U.S. officials operated within a military-legal repertoire built around UN speeches, ultimatums, and coalition branding, creating a recognizable script for acceptable action while narrowing possible interpretations of events. Iraqi communication, by contrast, relied on honor-focused and nationalist rhetoric that resonated domestically but was frequently dismissed by Western audiences as evasive or unserious (Faizullaev, 2017). Powell’s cautious yet authoritative presentation at the UN further complicated matters by importing a strategic-security register into a setting associated with legal and humanitarian justification, thereby unsettling shared assumptions about what counted as legitimate evidence. Signaling theory helps explain why certain messages nonetheless gained credibility despite limited material proof. Powell’s ambiguous claims acquired force because the institutional authority of the UN and the reputational stakes of the setting made apparent dishonesty seem costly (Takei, 2024). Bush’s 48-hour ultimatum likewise signaled commitment because failure to act after such a public deadline would have damaged U.S. credibility (Crawford & Sobel, 1982). Iraqi appeals to honor, by contrast, were mainly calibrated to domestic and regional audiences and therefore circulated unevenly across diplomatic arenas. Translation and framing deepened this gap, especially when “liberation” was received as “occupation,” recasting intent within an entirely different moral register.

Translation and media mediation were active mediators that reshaped pragmatic force and perceived credibility. Saddam Hussein’s speeches, delivered largely in Arabic, drew on culturally loaded terms such as honor (كرامة), resistance (مقاومة), endurance (صمود), and martyrdom (شهادة), which carried legitimizing connotations in Iraqi and Arab political discourse but were often rendered in English in ways that suggested fanaticism or aggression (Barkho, 2010). From the perspective of Dynamic Equivalence Theory, this involved a loss of pragmatic equivalence (Nida, 1964). Conversely, the American discourse of “liberation” was often translated in Arab media as “occupation” (الاحتلال), reversing its moral force (Yang et al., 2025). Hedged formulations in Powell’s UN speech were also sometimes received as more categorical than the original wording warranted, with interpreters amplifying evidential certainty in ways consistent with Sense Theory (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984; Yang, 2012).

The linguistic mechanisms identified in this case operated within a broader environment shaped by strategic preferences for regime change, disputed intelligence assessments, institutional authority, and overwhelming military asymmetry. Diplomatic language influenced how these conditions were justified and understood, while the narrowing of political alternatives and the credibility attached to official institutions increased the escalatory consequences of communicative misalignment (Stieb, 2023; Zarefsky, 2007).

C. Case 3: Russia-Ukraine Conflict (2014)

The Russia-Ukraine conflict that began in 2014 followed the Euromaidan uprising, Crimea’s annexation, and the emergence of separatist activity in eastern Ukraine. At the center of the crisis were rival discursive constructions of sovereignty, security, and protection, articulated through diplomatic exchanges in Russian, Ukrainian, and English. Expressions such as “federalization,” “our people,” and “self-defense forces” were interpreted differently depending on linguistic, ideological, and audience-specific contexts and ultimately weakened ceasefire efforts.

The conflict was shaped by semantic misalignment and indeterminate political discourse between Moscow and Kyiv (House & Kádár, 2021; Kamyanets, 2024). From the perspective of Speech Act Theory, Vladimir Putin’s March 18, 2014 address, asserting that “Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia,” functioned as an illocutionary act of sovereign claim rather than simple historical narration. Its perlocutionary consequences were immediate: Ukraine, along with the EU and NATO, interpreted the statement as a legitimating act of annexation and a clear signal of escalation (Wodak & Forchtner, 2018). More broadly, the language of “protection,” “compatriots,” and “historical justice” operated as political framing. It performed political work by constructing intervention as both morally warranted and historically grounded. Yet these same utterances were processed by Ukraine and Western actors through a legal and territorial frame that treated them as revisionist justification rather than legitimate diplomatic argument.

The Minsk I and II agreements further exposed a mismatch in speech acts and communicative expectations. Expressions such as “special status,” “decentralization,” and “amnesty” failed to produce shared illocutionary force: Russia treated them as binding constitutional requirements, whereas Ukraine understood them as negotiable or conditional provisions (House & Kádár, 2021). Terms that appeared to promise compromise instead encoded incompatible political assumptions, weakening compliance from the outset. Pragmatic ambiguity intensified this instability. Russian discourse repeatedly relied on indeterminate deictic references such as “our people,” “compatriots,” and “local self-defense forces,” thereby obscuring agency and preserving plausible deniability within the logic of hybrid

warfare (Wodak & Forchtner, 2018). The term “federalization” similarly concealed opposing political models: in Russian narratives it was framed as a mechanism of minority protection and conflict resolution, whereas in Ukrainian interpretations it implied territorial fragmentation and the erosion of sovereignty (Kamyanyets, 2024).

Presupposition also played a decisive role. Statements such as “We must protect Russian speakers abroad” presupposed both the existence of imminent danger and a corresponding Russian obligation to intervene. These assumptions were categorically rejected by Ukraine, NATO, and the EU, producing sharply divergent interpretations of intent rather than any stable consensus about meaning (Cap, 2017; Hall, 1989). The divergence was intensified by incompatible intercultural frames. Russia articulated a civilizational self-image as the historical guardian of Eastern Slavic identity, while Ukraine and Western actors foregrounded sovereignty, territorial integrity, and self-determination. Breakdowns were reinforced at the level of genre and register. Russia combined historical narration, moral justification, and strategic indeterminacy; Ukraine emphasized legal reasoning grounded in international law; Western institutions relied on procedural and multilateral forms of address. These divergent genre conventions blurred the line between threats, obligations, and negotiation offers, repeatedly destabilizing the ceasefire process and narrowing the possibilities for shared interpretation.

A practice-theoretical perspective helps explain why communication broke down so persistently. The conflict unfolded through a clash of diplomatic repertoires, recognition routines, and shared expectations (Pouliot, 2008; Faizullaev, 2017). Russian officials drew on a civilizational and historical repertoire, stressing Crimea’s “inseparability,” shared identity, and duties toward Russian speakers. This repertoire was intelligible domestically, but in Kyiv and the West it was received as revisionist and illegitimate, producing failures of recognition (Pouliot & Cornut, 2015). Ukraine, together with the EU and NATO, relied instead on a legal and multilateral repertoire centered on sovereignty, procedural legitimacy, and international norms. Because Russia’s claims did not fit that evidentiary grammar, they were treated as illegitimate negotiating positions. Terms such as “special status,” “decentralization,” and “local elections” appeared mutually acceptable on paper, yet carried different constitutional and political meanings for each side. Russia treated them as binding structural commitments; Ukraine framed them as conditional, sequential, and negotiable. These divergences were compounded by status injury and symbolic competition over who had the authority to define regional order, leaving communication to revert to performative contestation rather than diplomatic recognition (Faizullaev, 2017).

Signaling theory clarifies an additional set of dynamics. Russian verbal statements such as “Crimea is inseparable” and “we will protect Russian speakers” were initially forms of cheap talk: easy to issue, strongly audience-oriented, and of limited credibility unless paired with observable, costly action (Crawford & Sobel, 1982; Trager, 2017; Takei, 2024). The deployment of forces, the support of local militias, and the consolidation of territorial control shifted these statements toward more credible commitments. When such actions were absent or deniable, the same rhetoric held little value for Kyiv and Western audiences. The Minsk process also exposed the enforcement problems created by ambiguity. Flexible wording allowed each party to signal different meanings to different audiences, enabling agreement without resolving the underlying interpretive divide. By contrast, sanctions, military mobilization, and institutional commitments functioned as costlier signals that tied positions to expected follow-through.

Translation and cross-lingual mediation were central to these processes. Many of the most important terms, including “federalization,” “special status,” “self-defense forces,” and “compatriots abroad,” did not travel cleanly across Russian, Ukrainian, and English. The Russian word *federalizatsiya* (“federalization”), for example, had no exact equivalent in Ukrainian institutional discourse. In Russian political language it implied decentralization and minority protection; in Ukrainian sociopolitical memory it was closely associated with disintegration, secession, and foreign domination (Kamyanyets, 2024). Literal translation therefore created a misleading appearance of semantic equivalence while concealing incompatible pragmatic implications, illustrating a failure of dynamic equivalence in Nida’s (1964) sense. The expression *nashi lyudi* (“our people”) also carried broader ideological scope in Russian political discourse, encompassing not only citizens but co-ethnics and Russian-speaking compatriots abroad. In Ukrainian and Western translations it was often rendered literally, obscuring this ideological reach and allowing different inferences about Russian intent.

Similar distortion surrounded the classification of separatist forces as *mestnye samooborony* (“local self-defense forces”). Russian media preserved the original term, maintaining a vocabulary of local legitimacy and plausible deniability, while Ukrainian authorities frequently rendered it as “Russian-backed militants,” foregrounding external control and coercion. The Minsk agreements were likewise burdened by ambiguous translations of “special status” (*osobyi status*) and “local self-government,” both of which carried different constitutional implications in the Russian and Ukrainian legal systems and later became leverage points for reinterpretation. Simultaneous interpretation in OSCE and UN negotiations added a further layer of instability. Russian delegations often used legal-historical vocabulary with strong cultural resonance that lost part of its institutional meaning in English, undermining perceived legitimacy, while Ukrainian legalistic claims were at times rendered into Russian with reduced procedural detail. Sense Theory helps explain this dynamic: interpreters reconstruct meaning holistically rather than mechanically reproducing form, so under conditions of geopolitical polarization even subtle lexical or syntactic choices can shape how obligations, rights, and intentions are perceived (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984). Translation thus became a battlefield of meaning in its own right rather than a neutral channel of transfer.

The trajectory of the conflict was also shaped by territorial contestation, military intervention, coercive asymmetry, domestic political narratives, and competing expectations concerning regional security. Linguistic and translational divergence amplified these pressures by permitting incompatible interpretations of agency, sovereignty, and obligation to persist within negotiations (Kamyantets, 2024).

D. Case 4: Israel-Hamas War (2023-2024)

The 2023-2024 Israel-Hamas war unfolded through competing narratives in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. Terms such as “Al-Aqsa Flood,” “evacuation orders,” and “self-defense” acquired sharply different meanings across contexts, while diplomatic interaction between Israel, Hamas, regional actors, and international institutions was further complicated by genre mismatches and inconsistent mediation across languages.

Hamas’s use of the phrase “طوفان الأقصى” (“Al-Aqsa Flood”) in its October 7 announcement functioned as a symbolic label and a commissive and declarative speech act. It projected ideological resolve, invoked religious legitimacy, and framed the event within a longer narrative of struggle over the Al-Aqsa Mosque (House & Kádár, 2021). Yet the phrase was received very differently by Israeli authorities and Western governments, who widely interpreted it as a declaration of expansive and open-ended war. This divergence illustrates a breakdown in the alignment between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, in which intended performative meaning produced unintended responses that intensified hostilities (Searle, 1969). Israel’s categorical commissive speech act, “We will eliminate Hamas,” reveals a parallel pragmatic divergence. Within the Israeli domestic context, the statement functioned as a performative expression of moral obligation and a commitment to restoring national security. Across regional and international contexts, however, it was often interpreted as suggestive of collective punishment and the threat of disproportionate or indiscriminate force (El Damanhoury et al., 2025; Iqbal & Farukh, 2025). Humanitarian communication also revealed important pragmatic failures. Israeli evacuation directives to Gaza civilians frequently used the Arabic phrase “سيتحمل المسؤولية,” which literally translates as “will bear responsibility” but in Palestinian communicative norms is often understood as a veiled threat rather than a neutral advisory (Yule, 1996). As a result, many civilians perceived evacuation alerts as signals of impending danger, which eroded trust in humanitarian messaging and reduced compliance with designated corridors.

Both parties relied on highly symbolic and, at times, dehumanizing language that widened the communicative fracture. Israeli descriptions of Hamas combatants as “human animals” circulated widely and, when translated into Arabic, provoked widespread outrage and deepened hostility. Hamas, for its part, characterized Israeli airstrikes using terms such as “genocide,” “massacre,” and “desecration of Al-Aqsa,” invoking religious imagery and activating collective memory frameworks. These opposing discursive strategies reflected a wider intercultural rupture: Israeli rhetoric was grounded in narratives of national security and historical trauma, while Hamas framed the conflict through the lens of religious eschatology and pan-Arab identity (Wodak & Forchtner, 2018; Cap, 2017). Clashes in genre further exacerbated the problem. Israeli discourse predominantly employed a legal-military register, framing actions through expressions such as “counterterrorism operation” and “self-defense.” Hamas combined religious and nationalist rhetoric, while third-party mediators, including the United Nations, Qatar, Egypt, and NGOs, used humanitarian or neutrality-based discourse. The result was a form of semantic polyphony in which labels such as “war on terror,” “genocide,” and “humanitarian catastrophe” circulated simultaneously without shared reference points (House & Kádár, 2021).

A practice-theory perspective shows a collapse of shared repertoires, recognition routines, and communicative habits (Pouliot, 2008; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015; Faizullaev, 2017). Hamas drew on a repertoire that combined insurgent identity with religious symbolism. “طوفان الأقصى” functioned as a performative signal of steadfastness, sacrifice, and sacred duty, but was received by Israeli and Western audiences as an existential threat. Israel relied on a legal-military repertoire shaped by counterterrorism doctrine, evacuation directives, and commitments such as “we will eliminate Hamas,” which Hamas read as evidence of total-war intent. Because uptake depends on competence in a shared diplomatic field (Jönsson & Hall, 2005), these divergent repertoires produced systematic misrecognition. Evacuation messages, including Arabic renderings that implied coercion, were widely read locally as instruments of displacement rather than humanitarian measures. Hamas’s sacralized narratives were treated in Israeli and Western settings as maximalist threats rather than coded resistance claims. Mediators, meanwhile, used a neutrality and civilian-protection genre, yet competing frames such as “war on terror,” “genocide,” and “humanitarian catastrophe” prevented the emergence of an agreed script for repair (Roselle et al., 2014).

Translation was central to this process. Hamas’s phrase “طوفان الأقصى” (“Al-Aqsa Flood”) carried connotations in Arabic political and religious discourse of divine cleansing, apocalyptic renewal, and collective resistance, yet when translated literally into English and Hebrew it lost much of its sacred and metaphorical resonance and was instead recast as a radical slogan associated with indiscriminate violence. From the perspective of Dynamic Equivalence Theory, this reflects a failure to convey both the pragmatic intent and symbolic depth of the original expression (Nida, 1964). Israeli alerts issued to Gaza residents included the phrase “سيتحمل المسؤولية,” which lexically means “will bear responsibility” but pragmatically carries the force of a veiled threat in Arabic. Reports from humanitarian agencies suggested that real-time interpretation often resulted in mistranslation or incomplete rendering of such warnings, heightening fear and reducing civilian adherence to evacuation directives. In contrast, Israeli officials’ characterization of Hamas fighters as “human animals” underwent further semantic escalation in Arabic translation, where the phrasing was sometimes generalized beyond combatants and interpreted as dehumanizing the broader Palestinian population. Key international legal terms also shifted in translation. “Self-defense,” a recognized legal construct in UN discourse, was frequently

translated as “مِزْرٌ للهجوم” (“justification for attack”), altering its normative implications. At the same time, elements of Hamas’s rhetoric such as الدين (“religion”), الأرض (“land”), and المقدسات (“sacred sites”) were often neutralized in English translation, reducing their persuasive and moral force. Humanitarian mediation exposed similar volatility, as operational terms such as “safe zones,” “evacuation windows,” and “buffer areas” were translated into Arabic without stable conceptual equivalents in the lived reality of Gazan civilians. In line with Yang et al. (2025) and Yang (2012), translation here functioned as political framing rather than neutral transfer. The case shows how linguistic indeterminacy, incompatible communicative repertoires, and translational distortion shaped legitimacy, perception, and escalation in a multilingual conflict setting.

These linguistic dynamics interacted with military objectives, asymmetric power relations, domestic political pressures, and deteriorating humanitarian conditions. Competing frames and translation choices shaped public and diplomatic interpretations of these conditions, thereby reinforcing mistrust and limiting the possibility of establishing a shared communicative basis for restraint (El Damanhoury et al., 2025; Iqbal & Farukh, 2025).

E. Cross-Case Synthesis

The four cases reveal recurring patterns in how diplomatic language is produced, interpreted, and mediated across crises. Across all cases, escalation was shaped by interactions between linguistic formulation, pragmatic inference, diplomatic practice, and translation. These patterns appear at three levels: linguistic-pragmatic processes, diplomatic repertoires, and translation-mediated meaning.

Across the four cases, linguistic misalignment did not operate in isolation. Its escalatory effects emerged through interaction with military capabilities, institutional authority, domestic political pressures, ideological commitments, and pre-existing strategic objectives. Language shaped how these conditions were interpreted, justified, and communicated, whereas the conditions themselves affected which messages appeared credible, threatening, or negotiable. This relationship is consistent with recent work that situates crisis communication within affective, embodied, and material environments (Charalambous et al., 2025).

At the linguistic-pragmatic level, all four cases show that the force of diplomatic speech acts was shaped by how those acts were interpreted in context. Utterances framed as warnings, deterrent signals, reassurances, or symbolic affirmations were frequently understood differently by opposing actors, often as explicit threats, ultimatums, or indications of irreversible intent. Pragmatic features such as ambiguity, implicature, presupposition, and deixis played a central role in shaping these divergent interpretations, particularly in conditions of limited trust and high strategic uncertainty.

At the level of diplomatic practice, the cases show that communication depended on shared expectations regarding genre, sequencing, and legitimacy, which were not consistently aligned across actors. Statements that conformed to one diplomatic repertoire were not always recognized as such by others, leading to breakdowns in recognition of intent. Differences in communicative conventions, institutional roles, and audience orientation contributed to situations in which messages were interpreted outside the frameworks in which they were produced. In this sense, crisis communication was shaped by what was said and whether interlocutors recognized the act being performed as diplomatically meaningful within a shared field of practice.

Translation and interpretation also played a central role in shaping how diplomatic messages circulated across linguistic and political contexts. Across the cases, translated discourse differed in tone, emphasis, and lexical choice from source texts, altering how statements were received by different audiences. These shifts affected how utterances were categorized as conciliatory, threatening, credible, or evasive and contributed to divergent understandings across actors. Translation therefore emerged as a recurrent feature of multilingual crisis communication rather than a merely technical matter of linguistic transfer, with significant consequences for interpretation.

These patterns show that miscommunication in diplomatic crises emerges from the interaction of linguistic ambiguity, pragmatic inference, divergent communicative repertoires, and translation-mediated variation. These dynamics recur across different historical and geopolitical contexts, indicating that they are not case-specific but systematically embedded in crisis communication. The discussion turns from these recurring patterns to their broader implications for linguistic pragmatics, diplomatic practice, and translation in international conflict.

VI. DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that miscommunication is a constitutive mechanism of crisis diplomacy. Across cases, escalation was shaped by recurring mismatches between illocutionary intent and uptake, by failures of diplomatic recognition rooted in incompatible communicative repertoires, and by translational shifts that altered tone, force, and inferred intent across linguistic and political contexts.

At the linguistic-pragmatic level, the analysis shows that diplomatic speech acts operate through uptake shaped by context, inference, and audience positioning (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Communicative acts intended as deterrent gestures, provisional warnings, reassurance, or symbolic affirmation were repeatedly construed as explicit threats, uncompromising ultimatums, or declarations of irreversible action. The study therefore reinforces a central insight of Speech Act Theory while also extending pragmatic accounts of political discourse: ambiguity is not inherently stabilizing or destabilizing. Its effects depend on whether interlocutors share sufficient interpretive ground to recognize

broadly similar meanings in threats, reassurances, obligations, and offers. Where such overlap exists, ambiguity may preserve flexibility and permit diplomatic maneuver; where it is absent, ambiguity amplifies mistrust, ideological projection, and strategic worst-case interpretation (Levinson, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Cap, 2017).

The findings also refine diplomatic practice theory by showing that communication failure is rooted in wording, inference, and repertoire misalignment and disrupted recognition processes. Effective diplomacy depends on shared expectations regarding communicative genre, procedural sequencing, legitimacy claims, and the forms through which intent becomes recognizable. When those expectations are weak or absent, speech acts do not simply become ambiguous; they fail to secure uptake within the very practices that constitute diplomacy as a social field (Pouliot, 2008; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015). Breakdown, in other words, occurs not only because actors say different things, but because they do not inhabit the same communicative repertoires for recognizing what counts as an offer, a warning, a concession, a face-saving move, or a legitimate diplomatic claim (Faizullaev, 2017; Jönsson & Hall, 2005).

A further contribution of the study lies in showing that translation operates as a structural dimension rather than a passive channel of crisis communication. Across the cases, translation altered illocutionary force, ethical framing, and inferred intent, supporting key insights from translation theory while extending them into the study of international conflict (Nida, 1964; House, 2016; Yang et al., 2025). In multilingual crises, diplomatic meaning is not simply transmitted across languages; it is re-mediated through lexical choice, register, cultural resonance, and institutional framing. Translational choices helped shape which statements appeared conciliatory, threatening, credible, evasive, or morally legitimate across different audiences (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984; Yang, 2012).

These findings contribute to several overlapping fields. In linguistics and pragmatics, they show how speech acts, inference, and framing operate under high-stakes institutional conditions in which interpretive divergence can produce material consequences. In international relations, they extend practice-based and signaling approaches by showing that credibility depends not only on material costs, but also on linguistic form, audience configuration, and institutional context (Trager, 2017; Takei, 2024). In translation studies, they provide comparative empirical support for the claim that translation actively shapes political meaning rather than merely transmitting it. At the same time, the scope of the argument should be understood alongside several limitations: the study relies on publicly available texts, cannot capture confidential deliberations or informal exchanges, and does not permit causal quantification. Its aim is instead analytical explanation of communicative mechanisms across cases, while opening space for future corpus-based, ethnographic, and experimental research on multilingual crisis communication.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of linguistic misinterpretation in conflict escalation through a comparative analysis of four major international crises: the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the Iraq War (2003), the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2014), and the Israel-Hamas war (2023-2024). The analysis shows that miscommunication operates as a structural mechanism shaping crisis dynamics. Across the cases, escalation was repeatedly driven by mismatches between illocutionary intent and perlocutionary effect, failures of diplomatic recognition rooted in incompatible communicative repertoires, and translation-mediated reframing of meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

By integrating speech act theory, pragmatics, practice theory, signaling theory, and translation studies, the article advances an interdisciplinary framework for analyzing international crises as communicative processes. Ambiguity can function as a stabilizing or destabilizing force depending on whether interlocutors share sufficient interpretive ground to recognize threats, reassurances, and commitments in broadly similar ways. Where such overlap was absent, ambiguity intensified mistrust and facilitated escalation.

The study also shows that diplomatic breakdown is a failure of recognition and uptake rather than simple information transmission. Diplomatic speech acts do not succeed solely by being uttered; they depend on alignment in genre, register, and audience expectations. Translation further emerges not as a neutral conduit but as an active dimension of crisis communication, reshaping illocutionary force, moral framing, and perceived intent across multilingual settings. Recognizing these linguistic and translational dynamics is essential to understanding how diplomatic crises are shaped and intensified in a multilingual political world.

These findings also yield practical implications for crisis communication. Governments and international organizations should use professional diplomatic interpreters during message formulation, conduct systematic back-translation of high-stakes statements, and release verified source-language and translated versions simultaneously. Negotiating parties should establish shared multilingual glossaries for contested legal and political terms, preserve secure backchannels for clarifying illocutionary intent, and adopt rapid correction procedures when mistranslation alters a message's perceived force. Intercultural pragmatic training for diplomats, spokespersons, and interpreters would further improve recognition of culturally specific metaphors, indirect threats, and face-saving conventions. These measures cannot eliminate strategic conflict, yet they can reduce the interpretive uncertainty through which political and material tensions become more difficult to manage.

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Najib Najjar, PhD in Linguistics, is Assistant Professor at NDU. Specializing in AI, language education, and research methodology, he advances inclusive learning through research, curriculum development, and academic leadership. ORCID iD: 0000-0003-4882-479X.

Nehme Al Khawly, PhD in International Relations is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs and the Chairperson of the Department of Government and International Relations at Notre Dame University, Lebanon. His research focuses on International Relations, Political Economy, Geoeconomics, and Diplomacy. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-2221-8532.

Maya El Hajj, PhD in Translation Studies, is Associate Professor and Chairperson of the Department of English and Translation at NDU, specializing in translation and intercultural studies with extensive international academic experience and research contributions. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8045-4306.

May Akl, PhD Translation Studies, is Assistant Professor of Translation Studies and Director of International Relations at NDU, with 25+ years' experience in political interpreting, translation, and in academic translator/interpreter training. ORCID iD: 0000-0003-4147-2533.

Anthony Nakhle is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Institut des Sciences Politiques - Université Saint-Joseph (Lebanon) and lecturer in the Faculty of Law and Political Science at Notre Dame University. His research interests revolve around autocratization, democratization, resistance movements, comparative politics, strategic warfare, and Middle Eastern politics. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-6672-4744.