

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Agency Concealment in the Speeches of Kamala Harris and Spoljaric at the 60th Munich Security Conference

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Abstract—In the context of security negotiations, speeches that promote peace and stability are never ideologically neutral; rather, they contribute to the legitimization of existing power relations. This study aims to examine the linguistic strategies through which agency is concealed in speeches delivered at the 60th Munich Security Conference in 2024, with particular attention to how both the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars are legitimized or contested through selective representations of agency. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the study applies van Leeuwen's (2008) framework of social actor exclusion combined with van Dijk's (2024) model of nominalization to uncover the role of linguistic strategies in revealing ideologies. Two speeches delivered by American Vice President Kamala Harris and the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mirjana Spoljaric, were analyzed. It was found that genericization and nominalization strategies were remarkably employed in Harris's speech to conceal the agent in comparison with Spoljaric's speech, which preferred suppression to completely anonymize the agent. Moreover, both speakers resorted to indetermination to render responsibility vague, particularly when addressing sensitive content. Ideologically speaking, Harris concealed agency to naturalize negative actions in the Middle East and to redirect blame and responsibility in the Eastern European war, while Spoljaric highlighted the victims, generating sympathy to delegitimize war in international security conferences. It is concluded that agency concealment is employed not only by humanitarian actors but also by political actors as a strategic tool to legitimize or delegitimize war.

Index Terms—critical discourse analysis, social actor exclusion, humanitarian discourse, political discourse

I. INTRODUCTION

Actor descriptions in war-related discourse are inherently ideological. They serve “semantic, rhetorical, and argumentative functions in the expression of opinion” (Van Dijk, 2025, p. 21). Through selective emphasis, omission, misrepresentation, or backgrounding, linguistic choices can reshape the representation of events in a particular way that enhances in-group positivity or out-group negativity. A key discursive mechanism in this process is the concealment of agency, particularly when narrating the negative actions of “our group” or the sensitive actions of “their group”.

This phenomenon occupies a crucial role in contemporary political and humanitarian discourse. The ongoing wars in Gaza and Ukraine have triggered intense controversy in global platforms, where world leaders strategically obscure responsibility. The Munich Security Conference (MSC), one of the most influential meetings for international policy-shaping, provides a rich site for analyzing how political and humanitarian actors linguistically mask agency. For instance, the statement “Aleksey Navalny has died in Russia” offers a clear example of narrating Navalny's death as natural and not caused by anyone. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is therefore essential for unpacking how such linguistic practice contributes to undermining or maintaining power structures (Meyer, 2021).

Even though past studies have explored certain aspects of the linguistic concealment in journalistic discourse (e.g., Lingle, 2017; Sogut, 2018; El-Astal & Al-Mutawa, 2024) and in a single-sided political speech (e.g., Mutlug & Ali, 2025), research remains limited in two major ways: first, existing research rarely compares how agency concealment operates across different institutional contexts, particularly between political and humanitarian discourses, despite their contrasting mandates and communicative norms. Second, few comparative studies analyze how conflicting geopolitical narratives (e.g., Ukraine and Gaza) shape the linguistic strategies used to obscure agency in highly influential security discourse.

A further gap arises from the fact that most previous studies have focused exclusively on direct conflict actors (e.g., Putin or Zelenskyy), overlooking how indirect global figures obscure agency. Unlike these works, the current study examines two such actors: Kamala Harris, representing U.S. political power, and Mirjana Spoljaric, representing the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). As a result, it offers a novel perspective on how responsibility is

framed by obscuring the social actor. This gap is significant, given the growing scholarly emphasis on how institutional discourses contribute to legitimizing or contesting power asymmetries.

To fill in this gap in the research, the current study investigated agency concealment strategies in selected political and humanitarian speeches delivered by Kamala Harris and Mirjana Spoljaric at the 60th Munich Security Conference (MSC). Through the application of an expanded CDA framework, this study compared how both speakers framed the wars in Palestine and Ukraine by focusing on how social actor exclusion role shifts or obscures responsibility. This approach provides insight into probable ideological biases embedded in institutional war discourse. As a result, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the frequencies and distribution of agency-concealment strategies in the selected political and humanitarian speeches?
2. How do these speeches differ in their linguistic and discursive strategies for shifting or obscuring responsibility?
3. In what ways do these social-actor strategies reveal underlying power relations and ideological positions in the representation of the conflict?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates broader social and cultural context, moving beyond textual structure to uncover the interaction between discourse, ideology, institutions, and representations (Wodak & Meyer, 2016; Flowerdew & Richardson, 2019). Its critical dimension lies in its ability to denaturalize language by exposing the ideas, omissions, and taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in texts. This process reveals that texts are not neutral; rather, they are “ideological and seek to reshape the representation of persons and events for particular ends, which reflects the power interests buried in texts” (Mayr & Machin, 2023, p. 326).

This assumption gave rise to the idea of the present study, which analyzes the ideological concealment of agency in discourse and its influence on legitimizing or contesting military actions, particularly in contemporary conflict zones such as Palestine and Ukraine. Such discourse requires a discourse-historical approach (DHA), described by Wodak and Mayer (2016) as problem-oriented in that it demands not only linguistic dimensions but also contextualization. It primarily has to do with the historical or sociopolitical context in which this kind of speech was spoken. Contextualizing discourse in this way (DHA) is to “analyze, understand, and explain the complexity of the objects under investigation” (p. 3).

B. Representation in War Discourse

Representation is a core concept in critical discourse analysis. There is no neutral way in the representation of a person, groups, or events (Gavriely-Nuri, 2018; Mayr & Machin, 2023). One aspect of political representation is exclusion, which is viewed by Chilton (2004, p. 201) as “defining ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ shaping identities, and legitimizing policies” such as framing others as enemies or friends. Those strategies of exclusion were later developed by van Leeuwen (2008) in representing social actors, and they are used as the main analytical framework of this study. Sometimes such social actor representation is made explicit, such as “the Russians made a terrorist attack,” and sometimes it is made implicit, as in the following examples provided by Tonori (2011, p. 203) depicting how the Guardian described certain events in Iraq: “the death of Uday and Qusay, or the killing in July of Saddam’s two sons,” where the agent is anonymous. He adds that such concealment of agency helps to mask the responsibilities of agents.

C. Strategies of Social Actors’ Concealment

Actor description is a major topic in critical discourse analysis, which is ideologically motivated. Such a description serves “semantic, rhetorical, and argumentative functions” (van Dijk, 2025, p. 21). Concealing, de-emphasizing, or misrepresenting social actors is a widespread phenomenon. Language can thus be used to hide or shift emphasis away from social actors to obscure or background responsibility, depersonalize negative-related agency, undermine, or maintain power (Meyer, 2021). This supports the argument that there is no neutral representation of groups or events (Mayr & Machin, 2023; Gavriely-Nuri, 2018). In this regard, agency can be concealed totally or partially: *complete concealment* is realized by suppression and nominalization, whereas partial concealment is realized by indetermination, genericization, circumstantialization, and impersonalization, as shown below:

1. Suppression: e.g., “the city was bombed” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 42).
2. Nominalization: e.g., “killing civilians is illegal.” This hides the agency by intentionally ignoring “who did what to whom and when” (van Dijk, 2024, pp. 131-138).
3. Indetermination: e.g., “some people” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 52).
4. Genericization: e.g., “fighters,” “troops (army),” “immigrants,” etc. (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 36).
5. Circumstantialization: e.g., “due to the ongoing tensions, violence is reputed” (van Leeuwen, 2008). Halliday and Matheson (2014) refer to such cases as eventive sentence structures, where, to avoid blame, the focus is on the event rather than the agent.
6. Impersonalization, which involves:
 - (a). Utterance autonomization (e.g., surveys, reports, etc.), which lends impersonal authority to statements.

- (b). Spatialization, which is realized through “metonymical reference,” denotes institutionalized places associated with social actors (e.g., “the White House decided...”) used to decrease responsibility and blame (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 46).

D. Background to the Munich Security Conference

The Munich Security Conference (MSC) is hosted every year in Munich, Germany, with its motto being “Peace Through Dialogue.” More than 450 senior decision-makers from around the world participate in an intensive debate on topics such as wars (Franke, 2024). Although MSC was originally established as a neutral platform for discussing global conflicts with the same eye, it has been criticized—particularly by the Russian politicians—for reinforcing Western dominance. Thus, MSC speeches provide suitable data for this study. Consequently, applying critical discourse analysis to MSC speeches reveals how various political power structures influence the representation of conflicts and wars on a global scale.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze political and humanitarian discourses of war in the Munich Security Conference (MSC). In this regard, the CDA approach is appropriate in analyzing political discourse since it addresses the way language is shaped and challenged by ideologies and power dynamics (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1998).

A. Data Collection and Description

Two speeches delivered at the 60th Munich Security Conference (MSC) in 2024 were selected for this study. They were delivered by two globally influential speakers: American Vice President Kamala Harris and International Committee of the Red Cross President Mirjana Spoljaric. The official videos of both speeches were retrieved from MSC’s official webpage, <https://securityconference.org/en/medialibrary/>. Then, they were transcribed by the researchers.

These speeches were chosen due to the representative roles of both Kamala Harris and Mirjana Spoljaric in international security policy. Moreover, each speaker tackled different aspects of war—Harris focused on the military side, while Spoljaric addressed the humanitarian perspective of war. This duality made their speeches particularly valuable for critically examining how war is framed, allowing the study to cover multiple dimensions of war-related discourse.

Additionally, these speeches were delivered during a critical time after two conflicts: the first was the escalation of the Russian attack on Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022, and the second was Hamas’ attack on Israel on October 7, 2023—the main topic of discussion at the 60th Munich Security Conference.

B. Research Design

This study implemented a mixed-method approach, which, as noted by Khanday and Khanam (2019), provides “maximal information about the problem under consideration” (p. 374). In the same regard, Ary et al. (2010) maintain that qualitative and quantitative research methods can be mixed in various ways. The use of mixed methods also offers various benefits concerning the scope of explanations of the research problem, which leads to having the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods (Tzagkarakis & Kirtas, 2022).

Accordingly, this study started with a quantitative analysis, and the results were then used as a basis to enhance the reliability of the subsequent qualitative analysis, applying what Flick (2002) refers to as “triangulation,” which is used to validate the methodological processes.

C. Analytical Framework

Van Leeuwen’s (2008) Social Actor Constructions and van Dijk’s (2024) Nominalization were employed in this study. Besides analyzing the linguistic strategies of agent concealment of the two speeches, their interpretation went in line with Reisigl and Wodak’s (2001, 2009) Discourse-Historical Approach, with their historical and social context, to reveal comparatively the implicit ideology used in the language of each speech.

Accordingly, van Leeuwen (2008) emphasizes that social actors are either left out completely (suppression) or mentioned elsewhere in a way not linked to the main event or action (backgrounding). Both strategies are employed to obscure responsibility, shift blame, and avoid direct accusation (see also van Leeuwen, 1996). The critical discourse analytical framework used in the current study is visualized in Figure 1.

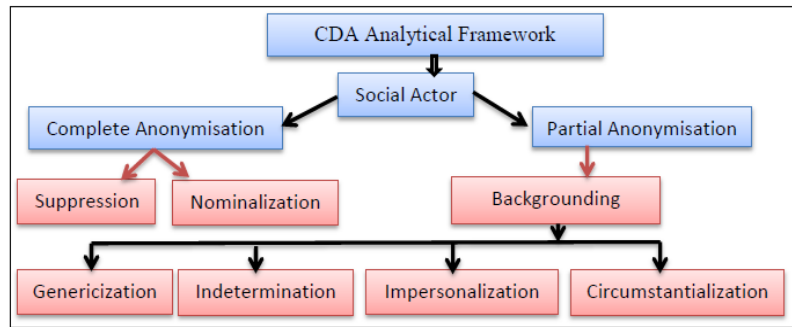


Figure 1. The Eclectic Model of the Current Study After van Leeuwen (2008) and van Dijk (2024)

D. Procedures of Analysis

The two speeches in this study were analyzed in two main phases: the analysis started quantitatively and then proceeded qualitatively (cf. Sogut, 2018; Abbadi et al., 2024). First, a quantitative descriptive analysis was conducted to pinpoint the overall patterns, frequencies, and distribution of the six strategies of agent concealment. These strategies were categorized into two main types depending on whether the agent responsible for the action could be traced in the context or not: complete concealment and partial concealment. They were further classified into three categories:

1. Structural Concealment: (Suppression and Nominalization)
2. Referential Concealment: (Generificization and Indetermination)
3. Contextual and Impersonal Concealment (Circumstantialization and Impersonalization)

The frequencies were manually counted to allow for a comparative view of their usage across the two speeches.

In the second phase, the qualitative analysis proceeded through four ordered steps:

1. Pinpointing the strategy under examination.
2. Describing the linguistic realization of the strategy.
3. Selecting a textual example (typically a sentence).
4. Uncovering the ideological function and the political intent conveyed via the strategy.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

A. The Quantitative Stage of the Analysis

The general results and patterns of the strategies used in political and humanitarian discourses are shown in Table 1 and Figure 2 below.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCIES OF AGENT CONCEALMENT IN HARRIS'S AND SPOLJARIC'S SPEECHES

No.	Strategies	Harris's Speech		Spoljaric's Speech	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Suppression	10	15.15 %	13	33.33 %
2.	Nominalization	13	19.70 %	4	10.26 %
3.	Generificization	18	27.27 %	7	17.95 %
4.	Indetermination	17	25.76 %	9	23.08 %
5.	Circumstantialization	3	4.55 %	3	7.69 %
6.	Impersonalization	5	7.58 %	3	7.69 %
	Total	66 (63 %)	100 %	39 (37 %)	100 %

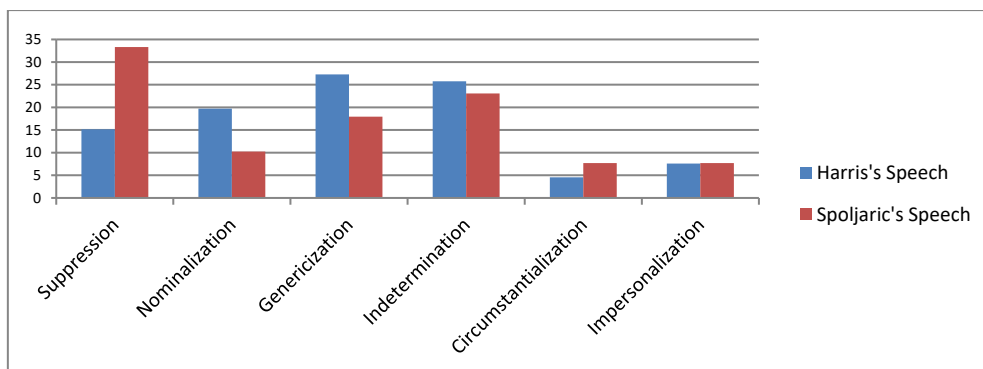


Figure 2. Agent Concealment in Harris's and Spoljaric's Speeches

After conducting the quantitative analysis, it can be seen that Harris extensively used agent concealment strategies. The results show that her politically oriented speech employed these strategies 66 times (63%), compared to 39

occurrences (37%) in Spoljaric's humanitarian-oriented speech. The most frequently used strategies in Harris's speech were genericization, used 18 times (27.27%), and indetermination, used 17 times (25.76%), while the least frequently used strategy was circumstantialization, which Harris used three times (4.55%). In Spoljaric's speech, the most frequently used strategies were suppression, used 13 times (33.33%), and indetermination, which was used nine times (23.08%). Spoljaric used circumstantialization three times (7.69%) and impersonalization also three times (7.69%), making them the least frequently used strategies.

Comparatively speaking, as shown in Figure 2, some strategies were used more frequently in Harris's speech than in Spoljaric's. Harris extensively used nominalization 13 times (19.70%), genericization 18 times (27.27%), and indetermination 17 times (25.76%). On the contrary, Spoljaric extensively used Suppression 13 times (33.33%) in her speech.

This quantitative analysis highlights the general patterns of agent concealment strategies that will be analyzed in greater depth in the next qualitative phase. Thus, the following in-depth examinations of the selected examples explore the discursive context in which these patterns occurred and connect these strategies to the socio-political circumstances surrounding the MSC discourse to figure out the implicit ideological meanings behind the concealment of actors in war discourse.

B. *The Qualitative Stage of the Analysis*

(a). *Structural Concealment of Agency*

Agency can be obscured by means of linguistic structures, thereby manipulating how events in war narratives are represented. This form of obscuring responsibility involves the complete deletion of agency; the agent is made completely anonymous by employing two strategies: suppression and nominalization (cf. van Leeuwen, 2008; van Dijk, 2024), leaving no trace of the agent in the sentence.

1. *Suppression*

This strategy involves the complete deletion of the social actor from the sentence, leaving the action appearing as agentless and seemingly natural and depersonalized. In the current text analysis, the frequency of suppression in Harris's speech is 10 instances (15.15%). The suppression strategy used in the data under consideration is linguistically realized through agentless passive constructions and intransitive verb forms. The verbs most commonly used with this strategy were in the form of passive or intransitive verbs, such as "died," "trampled," "released," "resolved," "frozen," "tortured," "raped," and "killed." The remarkable point in the occurrences of these verbs in this strategy is that the agency was concealed, as shown in examples 1 and 2:

1. "Women were horribly tortured and raped" (Harris, 2024).
2. "Aleksey Navalny has died in Russia" (Harris, 2024).

These examples are extracted from Harris's speech. Example 1 is used to narrate events related to the Palestine-Israel conflict. The agency committing such negative actions as torturing and raping women is left anonymous. The ideological function behind such anonymity is to hide the negative actions of America's ingroup in the Middle East. Example 2 describes the death of Aleksey Navalny in Russia. The linguistic choice of the verb "died" suggests that no one is responsible for this incident. Though it was narrated as a natural event, Western leaders, including American President Joseph Biden, had directly accused Russia of executing Navalny shortly before the Munich Security Conference was held in February 2024. Harris, however, obscured the agency of Putin's government to avoid a direct confrontation with Russia and its allies, who were there at the conference. This reflects the centrist ideology she adopts, as well as the influence of the Democratic Party, which typically promotes moderate positions on conflict, particularly during that period when she was approaching a critical election stage. Thus, Harris refrained from issuing direct accusations against Russia.

As for Spoljaric's speech, the frequency of suppression is 13 instances (33.33%). The suppression strategy in Spoljaric's speech is linguistically realized through agentless passives, intransitive verb forms, and eventive sentence structure (Halliday & Malthusian, 2014). The verbs most commonly used with this strategy are "criticized," "ratified," "bound," "abode," "reduce," and "spread." The remarkable point in the occurrences of these verbs is that agency was consistently concealed, as illustrated in examples 3 and 4 below:

3. "We have been criticized for our neutrality and for not taking a side" (Spoljaric, 2024).
4. "To preserve that principle, you have to reduce harm for civilians and reduce harm for non-combatants" (Spoljaric, 2024).

In example 3, "we" refers to the International Committee of the Red Cross president. Here, Spoljaric hid those who criticized the ICRC by using the agentless passive voice. It seems that the social actors concealed in this example are Western political leaders who asked her to take a position. In example 4, Spoljaric hid the agent by means of using a non-finite construction and the generic pronoun "you," which refers to all parties to the conflict. Thus, the social actors responsible for harming civilians are made anonymous. Those engaged in war are portrayed as failing to follow "that principle," namely, the Geneva Convention's principles, which are expected to guide the warring parties. She concealed such actors since they were associated with negative actions of "harming non-combatants." Ideologically speaking, Spoljaric hid the social actor due to her global responsibilities as president of the ICRC. She wanted to present herself to

all parties to the conflict as neutral, rather than ideologically biased, for authorization to enter any conflict zone. Therefore, she did not name the social actor, since they were connected to negative actions.

2. Nominalization

Nominalization is another strategy used to hide the agent by turning the verb into a noun. In Harris's speech, the frequency of this strategy was 13 (19.70%). It was linguistically realized through nouns derived from verbs, such as "effort," "existential threat," "the innovation," "the failure," "an attack," "a sustained presence," "the gains," "re-occupation," "change," "return," and "the work." Turning verbs into nouns helps Harris conceal agency in negative actions, such as saying "the failure to do so" instead of saying "if we fail to do so," which would explicitly imply America or NATO as weak in facing Russian expansion. Notably, all occurrences of these nouns obscure the agents, as shown in examples 5 and 6 below:

5. "The failure to do so would be a gift to Vladimir Putin" (Harris, 2024).
6. "The work that will happen among nations will be critically important" (Harris, 2024).

In example 5, instead of stating "if America failed," Harris turned the verb "fail" into the noun "failure" since such a word as this carries a negative evaluative meaning. The context of example 5 reflects ongoing geopolitical tension between America and Russia, implying that Ukraine would be a gift to Russia if America and NATO failed. Harris stressed that, to avoid such failure, NATO members, led by America, should "secure critical weapons and resources that Ukraine so badly needs" (The White House, 2024) to counter Russia's expansion towards Europe. Ideologically, Harris obscured her government's agency in this unfavorable hypothetical scenario. Similarly, in example 6, who will do the "work" is left obscure. Initially, it seems to refer to Western countries; however, context reveals that "the King of Jordan" is also being deliberately concealed. The West, under the leadership the United States, frames collaboration with Arab states as "critically important" for strategic goals. America's ultimate goal relates to ensuring Israel's security and achieving stability in the Middle East. Thus, Harris ideologically concealed the king of Jordan's agency to maintain diplomatic channels and emphasize the collective rather than the individual responsibility within the Munich Security Conference.

In Spoljaric's speech, the frequency of nominalization is 4 (10.26%). This strategy co-occurs with verbs such as "preserving humanity," "taking hostages," and "compliance." Most instances refer to negative actions, as shown in examples 7 and 8 below:

7. "Taking hostages is a violation of international humanitarian law, and mistreating prisoners of war is a violation of the Geneva Conventions" (Spoljaric, 2024).
8. "This extinction of the other at the end of the road is necessary for victory and at any cost" (Spoljaric, 2024).

The actions of "taking hostages" and the "mistreatment of prisoners of war" in example 7 are banned under the *Geneva Convention (IV) relative to Civilians* (1949), Article 34, and the *Geneva Convention (III) relative to Prisoners of War* (1949), Article 13, which classify them as war crimes (Amnesty International, 2025, para. 3). During her last visit to Gaza, Spoljaric noted Israel's mistreatment of Gazans. By using nominalization, she masks the responsibility of Israeli forces to align with Western ideological expectations. In example 8, nominalizing "this extinction" removes responsibility from both attacking countries (Russia and Israel) and the attacked countries (Ukraine and Palestine), portraying each as attempting to defeat the other at any cost. Ideologically, Spoljaric subtly criticizes all countries in conflict and delegitimizes their political actions.

(b). Referential and Identification Concealment

Referential and identification concealment involve masking who is referred to or identified in discourse. They encompass genericization and identification, both of which fall under partial concealment of agency.

1. Genericization

This strategy replaces the specific agent with general categories to distract attention away from the agent. In Harris' speech, the frequency of this strategy is very remarkable in that it occurs 18 times (27.27%). It is expressed through abstract entities (e.g., "alliance"), indefinite singular nouns (e.g., "aggressor"), collective nouns ("American people," "the army," and "the government"), and generic references (e.g., "nations" and "forces of tyranny"). Most occurrences depersonalize agency, as shown in examples 9 and 10:

9. "History offers a clue: if we stand by while an aggressor invades its neighbor with impunity, they will keep going" (Spoljaric, 2024).
10. "When America has isolated herself, threats and forces of tyranny and fascism have grown" (Harris, 2024).

In example 9, genericization appears in the noun "aggressor" preceded by the indefinite article, which is deliberately general. However, the phrase "invades its neighbor" indicates that the concealed actor is Putin. In 2024, Putin initiated war on his "neighbor" (Ukraine) and acted with "impunity," and continued to during the 60th Munich Security Conference. Harris employs genericization to avoid accusing Putin directly. She reframed the conflict as a struggle not against one person (i.e., Putin), but with the whole doctrine of fascism of the Russian government.

In example 10, genericization appears in the plural nouns "threat" and "force," which serve to obscure the agent. The context again suggests that the concealed actor is Russia, whose "forces of tyranny and fascism" threatened to

destabilize Europe. Ideologically, Harris emphasizes America's role as a guardian of freedom and "collective security," portraying Russia as a universalized threat, making the defense appear as a moral duty.

In Spoljaric's speech, the frequency of genericization is seven (17.95%), reflecting strategic ambiguity typical of humanitarian discourse. It appears through plural nouns such as "states, parties, armed groups, and humanitarian actors" or singular nouns with indefinite determiners such as "any civilian," as seen below in examples 11 and 12:

11. "The parties to a conflict ... allow us to occupy a neutral position" (Spoljaric, 2024).

12. "States came together and created the ICRC" (Spoljaric, 2024).

The generalized terms "the parties to a conflict" and "states" do not reveal who is meant. Nonetheless, the context of the 60th Munich Security Conference, which discussed the war in Palestine and the war in Ukraine, made it possible to infer that the anonymous actors in example 11 are Israelis, Gazans, Russians, and Ukrainians. Moreover, example 12 concealed the social actor in which "states" are involved in creating the International Committee of the Red Cross President. Historically speaking, the European states that took part in the creation of the ICRC—such as Switzerland, Britain, etc.—are the social actors that are implied. Ideologically, this concealment helps the ICRC president to maintain neutrality and avoid negative political associations.

2. Indetermination

Indetermination makes the agent anonymous through vague expressions or exophoric pronouns. This strategy appears remarkably in both speeches; it occurred 17 times (25.76%) in Harris's speech. It is linguistically realized through indefinite pronouns (e.g., "some") or generic reference (e.g., "one" must act), as shown in the following examples:

13. "There are some in the United States who disagree; they suggest... to embrace dictators...some questioned the usefulness of NATO" (Harris, 2024).

14. "We are going to end the conflict that Hamas initiated on October 7th" (Harris, 2024).

The indefinite pronoun "some," which appears twice in example 13, and the pronoun "they" divert attention from the real actor. By resorting to Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach (DHA), it can be inferred that these vague references point to the Republican Party in America, which usually criticizes the Democratic administration. In example 14, the collective pronoun "we" has no clear referent; given the situation in the Middle East, "we" likely refers to the United States and Israel. Ideologically, Harris uses indetermination to shift responsibility away from Israel regarding harm to civilians in the conflict.

In Spoljaric's speech, indetermination appears nine times (23.08%). It is also realized through indefinite pronouns (e.g., "everybody") or personal pronouns with vague reference (e.g., "we"), as shown in examples 15 and 16 below:

15. "Everybody who has an influence on a party to a conflict is bound to make their utmost...to ensure that IHL is implemented" (Spoljaric, 2024).

16. "We engage with everybody who bears weapons and has power" (Spoljaric, 2024).

In example 15, expressions like "everybody" make social actors unspecified or anonymous because it is impossible to determine exactly who "has an influence" on whom. The hidden actors might include China, who influences Russia to stop the war in Ukraine, or Saudi Arabia, who influences Qatar and Hamas to stop the war in Gaza; the list remains open. Additionally, in example 16, "'everybody' who bears weapons" likewise obscures specific actors. Ideologically, Spoljaric uses this vagueness to avoid accusing sensitive parties directly. However, she is not accusing everybody who bears a weapon, but only those who have power, such as Israel or Russia, and use it to harm civilians. This strategic vagueness enables humanitarian leaders to deliver critical messages without overt confrontation.

(c). Circumstantial and Impersonal Concealment

This third type of agency concealment shifts the focus away from social actors and attributes events to circumstances. This involves concealment by backgrounding the agency, resulting in diffused responsibility and making actions appear as outcomes of contextual factors or non-human entities rather than deliberate human decisions. In this study, this is done through circumstantialization and impersonalization strategies.

1. Circumstantialization

Circumstantialization shifts the focus away from the social actor to the circumstances. It is the least frequently used strategy in both speeches. In Harris's speech, its frequency is three (4.55%). It is linguistically realized in adverbial clauses such as "because of" and temporal circumstantial phrases such as "in these unsettled times," as shown in the following example:

17. "This year, we are meeting amid a conflict and instability in the Middle East" (Harris, 2024).

In this example, who causes such instability and conflict remains unnamed. Although such instability is widely associated with the ongoing Israeli military operations in Palestine, South Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iran, Harris presents their "meeting" at the 60th Munich Security Conference in 2024 with no specific accused agents. Ideologically, this obscures Israel's role in the instability in the Middle East. Using her hegemonic language, Harris redirects the attention to America's strategic adversaries, reflected in her reference to "Russia's continuing aggression in Ukraine" and "China's efforts to change the international order" (Harris, 2024). Consequently, the circumstances of the 60th

Munich Security Conference meeting are framed as the result of broader geopolitical tensions, rather than specific tensions and instability in the Middle East.

In Spoljaric's speech, the frequency of circumstantialization is three (7.69%). It is linguistically realized in prepositional phrases such as "due to," as shown in the following example:

18. "Due to globalization, the ripple effect spread faster and had a far greater impact" (Spoljaric, 2024).

In this example, Spoljaric concealed the human agent by presenting the word "globalization" as if it were the main cause behind the ripple effect in Ukraine or in Gaza. No explicit actor is identified in example 18. The only reason behind the ripple effect presented here is the external circumstances caused by globalization. The metaphor of the ripple effect signals the cross-border consequences of war, as seen in the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022; it had a ripple effect in the shortages of energy in Europe since Russia is the main source of natural gas, and this war created disruptions in gas exportation. Similarly, the Israel-Hamas escalation on October 7, 2024, had a ripple effect of instability in the surrounding regions (Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen, etc.). Strategically, this metaphor serves to encourage European unity to stand against the expansion of the "dictator" Putin and that all European countries will fall if Ukraine falls. Ideologically, Spoljaric avoids direct accusation of Russia and Israel in the escalation of the geopolitical tensions in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

2. Impersonalization

The impersonalization strategy is often interwoven with power, as it abstracts human agents and thereby legitimizes controversial or negative actions. In Harris's speech, it occurred five times (7.58%). It is realized through metonymic expressions, fulfilling the grammatical subject in sentences such as "the White House, America, and our leadership." Additionally, utterance autonomization, a subtype identified by van Leeuwen (2008), appears in expressions containing inanimate nouns such as "the report says" in example 19 and "America," as seen below in example 20:

19. "The report says that Aleksey Navalny has died in Russia" (Harris, 2024).

20. "How America reacts will affect... the people around the world" (Harris, 2024).

In example 19, the person who reported the death of Aleksey Navalny is not identified, and the verb "says" is attributed to a non-human agent, "report," consistent with utterance autonomization. Ideologically, this serves to highlight such crimes while avoiding reference to the individuals or institutions responsible for committing them. It also makes the international community sympathize with Julia Navalny (the wife of Aleksey Navalny), who was invited to deliver a speech at the 60th Munich Security Conference to condemn Russia for what happened to her husband in prison.

In example 20, American hegemony is emphasized by attributing the verb "respond" to the geographical place America rather than to Joe Biden, the U.S. president at that time. This reflects a political ideology in which American global influence is portrayed as institutional and enduring, independent of individual leaders, since presidents are temporal, while America's power and hegemony are permanent, as much as "how America reacts will affect" people everywhere. Concealing the human agency thus serves two purposes: first, to reinforce the notion of America's permanent global role; and second, to shift responsibility away from the current administration of the USA and place it on an institutional entity in order to legitimize the actions.

In Spoljaric's speech, impersonalization appears only three times (7.69%), often realized through metonymic expressions such as "the Geneva Convention," as illustrated below in example 21:

21. "The Geneva Conventions stand against preventing that from happening again in all places of conflict; these conventions preserve humanity and limit as far as possible harm to civilians" (Spoljaric, 2024).

The verbs "stand against," "preserve," and "limit harm" are attributed to the non-human agents, namely, "the Geneva Conventions." The responsible human actors—Israeli forces, particularly given Spoljaric's recent visit to Gaza—are concealed. After her visit, Spoljaric stated that the situation in Gaza would not be solved by transporting more soldiers but by offering protection to the Gazans (ICRC, 2023). At the 60th Munich Security Conference, she also stated, "I'm not speaking about Gaza because we work in a hundred situations of conflict" (Spoljaric, 2024). Here she is implicitly alluding to the severity of the war situation without naming the perpetrating actors. Ideologically, by hiding the social actor and mentioning only the name of the Geneva laws, she attempts to legitimize her actions so she might be perceived as neutral by the parties to the conflict and allowed to enter any war zones.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the two selected speeches—Harris's politically oriented discourse and Spoljaric's humanitarian-oriented discourse—showed different patterns in the use of concealment strategies of social actors.

The descriptive quantitative analysis phase revealed the general pattern of agent concealment; it was revealed that the total of agent concealment strategies was prevalent in Harris's speech. Her political discourse extensively employed concealment strategies at a higher percentage (63%) compared to Spoljaric's humanitarian discourse at 37%, as shown below in Figure 3:

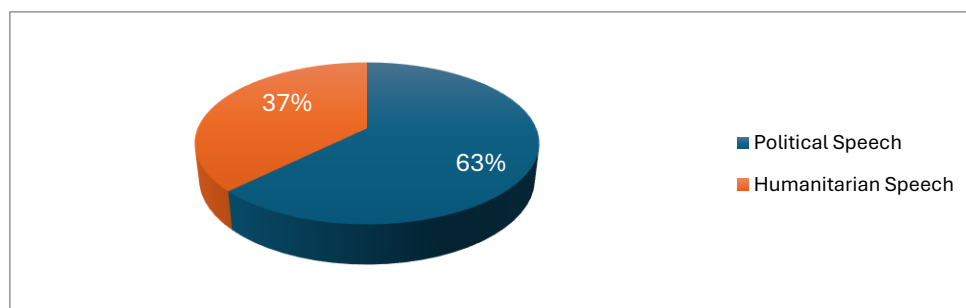


Figure 3. A Comparison of Social Actor Strategies Between Political and Humanitarian Discourse

This contrast between political and humanitarian discourse reflects both the ideological foundations of communication and the specific contextual framework of the Munich Security Conference, where issues of negotiating international responsibility and peace are highly sensitive. The extensive use of agency concealment strategies (63%) in political discourse enables political leaders to operate within a diplomatic and strategic tone to frame controversial actions as collective and inevitable.

In contrast, the humanitarian discourse had a frequency of 37% in using strategies of social actor concealment. This echoed the goal of humanitarian discourse to emphasize agency to enhance moral engagement and obedience to the Geneva Conventions.

This quantitative analysis paved the way to the qualitative analysis, as shown in Table 2:

TABLE 2
THE MOST COMMON STRATEGIES USED IN WAR DISCOURSE

Speech Type	Prevailing Strategies	Linguistic Features	Ideological Function	%
Political	Genericization	“aggressor,” “forces of tyranny,” “alliance,” “the American people,” “the army,” “nations,” “the government”	To dehumanize the other and universalize the conflict to make defense a moral duty.	27.27%
	Nominalization	“existential threat,” “effort,” “failure,” “attack,” “a presence,” “the gains,” “re-occupation,” “change,” “return the work.”	To emphasize collectivity to stop the expansion of Putin.	19.70%
Humanitarian	Suppression	Agentless passive constructions and intransitive verb forms are recurrent with verbs such as “criticized,” “ratified,” “bound,” “abode,” “reduce,” and “spread.”	To achieve neutrality and objectivity to be allowed to enter any conflict zone.	33.33%
	Indetermination	indefinite pronouns (e.g., “everybody”) or personal pronouns with vague reference (e.g., “we”)	To enable humanitarian actors to deliver harm messages without directly confronting other social actors.	23.08%

Surprisingly, the descriptive percentages of indetermination in both speeches were very close, with Harris’s frequency of use at 25.76% and Spoljaric’s frequency of use at 23.08%, with both using vague expressions associated with negative actions in conflict. Hence, indetermination was ideologically used to cover unpleasant and negative content in war discourse, co-occurring with verbs such as “disagree,” “question,” and “suggest.” This aligns with Vallauri et al.’s (2024) findings that such semantic vagueness can effectively distance the agent from unpleasant contents.

Moreover, in the political speech of Harris, genericization was the most commonly used strategy. Though American politicians are known to be hegemonic in their interactions, Harris employed partial concealment through the genericization of sensitive contexts, especially when the social actor was Russia, to achieve the ideological function of reducing conflict and softening criticism to maintain diplomatic legitimacy at the Munich Security Conference.

Nominalization was also prevalent in Harris’s speech; this strategy was linguistically realized through nouns derived from verbs such as “effort,” “existential threat,” “the innovation, the failure,” “an attack,” “a sustained presence,” “the gains,” “re-occupation,” “change,” “return,” and “the work.” Turning such verbs into nominal forms enabled Harris to not only conceal the agency behind negative actions, such as using “the failure to do so” instead of saying “if we failed to do so,” but also to obscure the agency of America’s regional allies (e.g., the king of Jordan) in a sensitive Middle Eastern context. This strategy is “critically important” for “achieving these ultimate goals” of ensuring Israel’s security and promoting stability in the Middle East.

It was also revealed that only Harris employed utterance autonomization, which is a subtype of “impersonalization.” This is consistent with Al-Zubaidi’s (2024) conclusions that social actors must be hidden in sensitive circumstances by using ambiguous language. She also hid Israel as the social actor when narrating negative actions in Gaza to ideologically dilute responsibility. This aligns with Pira’s (2023) findings that narrating “our” group’s negative action requires concealing the social actors. It also aligns with Mutlug and Ali’s (2025) findings that concealing agency helps reverse the blame, which otherwise would be on “our group.” Moreover, it was revealed that whenever the Ukraine war

was mentioned, Harris explicitly used “President Biden and I” (six times), “America” (eight times), or “the United States” (one time) to declare their siding with Ukraine. However, when it came to the situation in the Middle East, Harris used “we,” which might refer to the United States and Israel, whose names remained unspoken to avoid blame and shift responsibility for what was happening to the Palestinians.

Concerning Spoljaric and her speech, her most frequently used strategy was suppression, which she used 13 times (33.33%), representing complete agent concealment to ideologically avoid direct accusations by the West. The West, which often “criticizes” the International Committee of the Red Cross for not taking sides in conflicts,” has overlooked its own inconsistencies. Suppression also enriched Spoljaric’s humanitarian discourse in that her agent concealment helped her in highlighting the victims wherever there was a conflict. Suppression influenced making events appear as crimes against the Geneva Conventions. In addition, her agent concealment tactic was used to reduce blame and leave room for negotiations as well as generate sympathy with the victims. This aligns with Volker and Gonzatti’s (2024) findings that social concealment helped highlight reshaping public discourse to implicitly legitimize or delegitimize actions without confrontations with dominant groups. Ideologically speaking, by hiding the social actor and reverting to the name of the Geneva laws, Spoljaric legitimized her decisions and comments about social aggressors (e.g., Russia, Israel, or Hamas).

VI. CONCLUSION

The current study examined the use of agent concealment strategies in the 2024 60th Munich Security Conference speeches delivered by an American vice president and the president of the ICRC. It was revealed that agent concealment is more frequent in Harris’s politically oriented speech than in Spoljaric’s humanitarian-oriented speech. In Harris’s speech, partial concealment through the genericization strategy was dominant among all other strategies in her demonizing discourse. On the contrary, in Spoljaric’s speech, complete concealment by suppression was extensively used in her humanitarian discourse. From the context, it was also revealed that the concealed social actors included Russia, Hamas, Israel, the West, the international community, and King Abdullah II of Jordan. The controlling themes in Harris’s discourse served the ideological functions of demonizing others by diluting responsibility, naturalizing actions as inevitable, and emphasizing collectivity to strengthen legitimacy. On the other hand, the controlling theme in Spoljaric’s speech addressed those who bear weapons to serve the ideological function of humanitarianism to implicitly dehumanize opponents and perpetrators. Additionally, it was revealed that most of the examples of social actor concealment were associated with negative content, which explains why these social actors were concealed, with some exceptions.

The current study contributes to critical discourse analysis by presenting empirical evidence of how agent concealment operates across different types of war discourses. It highlights the strategic ways political and humanitarian leaders employ linguistic choices to influence legitimizing or delegitimizing war. Furthermore, critically analyzing such speeches promotes greater attentiveness in producing appropriate political speeches in similar global conferences (cf. Rahimi Tehrani & Chalak, 2022). It also motivates future research to examine agent concealment in the discourse of unequal power politicians, thereby providing a more critical lens for analyzing war discourse and its broader social consequences.

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