

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In political discourse, evaluative language plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, justifying actions, and legitimising power, as seen in high-stakes speeches like Donald Trump's 2026 press conference on the capture of Nicolás Maduro. Language is not merely a tool for exchanging information but also a powerful means of expressing attitudes, emotions, and evaluations toward people, events, and ideas. Every act of speaking or writing inevitably involves evaluation, whether conscious or unconscious, as speakers select linguistic resources to position themselves and influence how reality is perceived.

Within the paradigm of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), language is understood as a social semiotic system, a network of choices through which speakers construct meaning in context (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Among the three metafunctions of language (ideational, interpersonal, and textual), the interpersonal metafunction is particularly concerned with how speakers negotiate relationships and stances. It is here that evaluation becomes central, as speakers use linguistic resources to express feelings, judge behaviour, and appreciate phenomena, often to legitimise controversial decisions like military interventions.

This interpersonal dimension of evaluation is systematically captured by the Appraisal Framework, developed by Martin and White (2005). Appraisal provides a detailed taxonomy for analysing how attitudes are constructed in discourse through three interrelated subsystems: Attitude (which includes Affect for expressing emotion, Judgment for assessing character and behaviour, and Appreciation for valuing objects and processes), Graduation (resources that amplify or diminish the strength of evaluations through force and focus), and Engagement (resources that open or close dialogic space, either presenting propositions as taken-for-granted monoglossically or acknowledging alternative voices heteroglossically). Appraisal thus serves as a bridge between the micro-level choices in a text and the broader social and ideological contexts in which those choices operate, such as polarizing "us vs. them" narratives in geopolitical rhetoric.

In institutional and public discourse, evaluative language takes on heightened significance. Political leaders and officials do not simply inform; they actively shape public opinion and construct legitimacy for their actions and policies. Evaluative resources are strategically deployed to justify decisions, build solidarity with supporters, and marginalize opposition. This is particularly evident in discourses of legitimation, where language works to present controversial actions as necessary, moral, or inevitable, as in Trump's justification of U.S. hegemony through military means.

Numerous studies have applied the Appraisal Framework to political discourse. For instance, Awaisuddin et al. (2024) applied Appraisal to the 2024 U.S. presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, revealing contrasting evaluative styles where Trump amplified negative judgments through high graduation and monoglossic engagement to assert authority. This highlights ideological divides in polarized contexts and shows how evaluative language influences public perception. Similarly, Megah et al. (2021) combined CDA with Appraisal's Attitudinal subsystem to uncover ideological stances in Indonesian presidential speeches, finding that judgmental tenacity dominated to positively evaluate social actors like the people as dependable, aiming to build trust and power relations. Related ideological analyses include Luo et al. (2021), who used van Dijk's framework on Trump's COVID-19 tweets, identifying strategies like repetition and metaphors to portray a positive "us" (U.S. as superior) and negative "others" (China as blamed), demonstrating inconsistencies aligned with group interests. Atmawijaya (2024) analysed Trump's 2024 campaign speech with Fairclough's CDA, examining rhetorical devices such as pronouns and hyperbole to construct "us vs them" narratives that mobilize supporters through populist themes of nationalism and distrust. These studies illustrate the effectiveness of Appraisal and ideological models in revealing evaluative and polarizing strategies in political rhetoric.

The present study focused on Donald Trump's rhetorical style, which is characterized by intense and polarized use of evaluative language. Trump's discourse frequently relies on hyperbolic expressions, strong graduation, and monoglossic assertions to create clear distinctions between in-groups and out-groups. This study examined his press conference speech delivered on January 3, 2026, at Mar-a-Lago, in which he announced the U.S. military operation that captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. In this highly controversial context, involving direct military intervention and questions of international law, Trump employed evaluative resources to construct a stark "Us vs. Them" narrative. This polarization aligned closely with van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square, which describes how ideological discourse emphasizes the positive attributes and actions of the in-group while highlighting the negative attributes of the out-group, and conversely de-emphasizes the opposite.

The capture of Maduro represented not only a military and political event but also a discursive act of character delegitimation. Through the speech, Trump justified the intervention by portraying the United States as a righteous enforcer of justice and Maduro as a criminal dictator responsible for narco-terrorism, gang violence, and regional instability. This study investigated how micro-level Appraisal resources worked together to achieve macro-level ideological effects, specifically the legitimization of U.S. military intervention and the assertion of American hegemony in Venezuela.

Despite extensive research on evaluative language in political discourse, there remained a notable gap in the application of an integrated Appraisal and Ideological Square approach to Trump's foreign policy rhetoric during his second term, particularly in relation to direct military actions such as the 2026 Venezuela intervention. This study addressed this gap by examining how evaluative language in the press conference speech realized ideological polarization to legitimise U.S. military intervention and hegemony in Venezuela.

1.2 Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of Appraisal resources (Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement) are present in Donald Trump's press conference speech regarding Nicolás Maduro's capture?
2. How do these Appraisal resources realize van Dijk's Ideological Square in constructing legitimacy for the U.S. military intervention and the capture of Nicolás Maduro?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the types of Appraisal resources (Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement) present in Donald Trump's press conference speech regarding Nicolás Maduro's capture.

2. To analyse how these Appraisal resources realize van Dijk's Ideological Square in constructing legitimacy for the U.S. military intervention and the capture of Nicolás Maduro.

1.4 Limitation of the Study

This study was limited to a qualitative discourse analysis of a single text: Donald Trump's press conference speech delivered on January 3, 2026, at Mar-a-Lago, concerning the U.S. military operation that captured Nicolás Maduro. The analysis focused exclusively on the linguistic resources of the Appraisal Framework (Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement) as outlined by Martin and White (2005), integrated with van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square, to examine how evaluative language contributed to ideological polarization and legitimation.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on a textual analysis of the speech transcript and does not incorporate multimodal elements, such as gestures, tone of voice, or visual aids from the original delivery, which could provide additional layers of meaning. Second, the findings are specific to this particular speech and context; they cannot be generalized to Trump's overall rhetorical style, other political discourses, or broader geopolitical implications of the 2026 Venezuela intervention. Finally, the study does not engage with legal, ethical, or international relations perspectives on the military action itself, as its primary concern is linguistic and discursive.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of linguistics, particularly in the areas of systemic functional linguistics, appraisal theory, and critical discourse analysis. Theoretically, the study enriched the application of the Appraisal Framework (Martin & White, 2005) by extending its use to a relatively underexplored context: foreign policy discourse during Donald Trump's second presidential term. While numerous studies have analysed Trump's rhetorical style in domestic and electoral settings, this research provided new insights into how Appraisal resources operate in speeches that legitimise direct military interventions. By integrating Appraisal with van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square, the study demonstrated the interplay between micro-level evaluative choices and macro-level ideological polarization, contributing to a deeper understanding of how language constructs and sustains hegemonic narratives in international relations discourse.

Practically, the findings have implications for critical media literacy and public awareness of political rhetoric. In an era where evaluative language is frequently used to justify controversial actions, this analysis highlighted mechanisms through which speeches can naturalize military interventions and delegitimise opposing figures or regimes. Such insights may benefit educators, journalists, and analysts in recognising and critiquing manipulative discourse strategies. Additionally, the study added to the

broader discourse on how language shapes perceptions of global events, particularly in the context of U.S. foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere, fostering more informed public and academic discussions on the role of rhetoric in legitimating power.

Overall, this research serves as a valuable reference for future studies on political discourse analysis, especially those examining the linguistic dimensions of legitimation in high-stakes geopolitical contexts.

1.6 State of the Art

The field of discourse analysis, particularly through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), has seen significant advancements in examining evaluative language in political rhetoric. The Appraisal Framework (Martin & White, 2005) has become a prominent tool for dissecting interpersonal meanings, with applications extending from media texts to high-stakes political speeches. Recent studies have increasingly integrated Appraisal with ideological models to uncover how language constructs power relations and polarization. Key developments include the application of Appraisal to U.S. presidential discourse, such as the work of Awaisuddin et al. (2024), who provided a comprehensive analysis of the 2024 Harris-Trump debate by utilising all three subsystems (Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement) to contrast empathetic, heteroglossic styles with authoritative, monoglossic assertions. This work highlighted ideological

divides in polarized contexts, demonstrating Appraisal's utility in revealing how evaluative strategies influence public perception.

Similarly, studies on Trump's rhetoric have explored ideological polarization through CDA frameworks, such as Luo et al. (2021), who applied van Dijk's model to Trump's COVID-19 tweets to identify systematic positive self-presentation of the U.S. and negative other-presentation of adversaries, and Atmawijaya (2024), who focused on rhetorical devices in Trump's 2024 campaign speech to construct "us vs. them" narratives. Beyond U.S. contexts, comparative applications like those by Megah et al. (2021) have enriched the field by combining CDA with Appraisal's Attitudinal subsystem in Indonesian presidential speeches to uncover hidden ideologies. The current state of the art thus shows a robust use of Appraisal and ideological models in domestic and electoral rhetoric, with Trump as a frequent subject due to his hyperbolic style.

However, applications to Trump's foreign policy discourse during his second term remain limited, particularly in cases involving direct military actions and hemispheric hegemony. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is a notable scarcity of research that fully integrates the complete Appraisal subsystems with van Dijk's Ideological Square to examine legitimation in speeches addressing military interventions like the 2026 capture of Nicolás Maduro. This study advances the state of the art by applying this integrated framework to Trump's January 3, 2026, press

conference speech, focusing on how evaluative resources realize ideological polarization to delegitimise Maduro and legitimise U.S. intervention. It contributes a novel analysis of contemporary geopolitical rhetoric, extending Appraisal and CDA to post-2024 foreign policy contexts and offering insights into the linguistic construction of hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.

