

LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES IN TRUMP'S VENEZUELA POST-OPERATION ADDRESS THROUGH ILLOCUTIONARY SPEECH ACTS ANALYSIS

¹*Yasir Mubarak, ¹Sabri Koebanu

¹Department of Indonesian Literature, Faculty of Letters, Universitas Pamulang, Jl. Raya Puspitek No. 46, Buaran, Tangerang Selatan, Banten, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author Email: yasir.mubarak@unpam.ac.id

Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: January 2026 Revised: March 2026 Accepted: July 2026 Published: October 2026	<i>This study examines how political legitimacy is constructed through illocutionary speech acts in President Donald Trump's address following the U.S. military operation against Venezuela. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with a single-case study design, the study analyzes a 58-minute-and-41-second presidential address comprising 295 clauses. The analysis integrates Searle's (1979) classification of illocutionary speech acts and van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of legitimation strategies. The findings reveal that assertive speech acts dominate (69.8%), followed by expressive (14.2%), commissive (12.5%), directive (2.4%), and declarative (1.0%) acts. Assertive acts primarily construct the official narrative of the operation by presenting claims about military achievements, security threats, and operational effectiveness as factual accounts. These utterances contribute to rationalization by portraying military intervention as necessary, successful, and strategically justified. Authorization is established through references to presidential and institutional authority, while moral evaluation emerges through negative representations of opponents and positive portrayals of American actions. Mythopoesis appears less prominently, mainly through warnings emphasizing the consequences of resistance. Commissive acts further reinforce legitimacy by projecting commitments to national security and political stability. The findings demonstrate that political legitimacy is discursively constructed through the interaction of different illocutionary functions and legitimation strategies. This study contributes to political pragmatics by explaining how micro-level speech acts support broader strategies of political legitimation in presidential discourse concerning military intervention.</i>
Keywords Illocutionary speech acts; Legitimacy; Political discourse; Pragmatics:	
How to cite: Mubarak, Y., & Koebanu, S. (2026). Legitimation Strategies in Trump's Venezuela Post-Operation Address Through Illocutionary Speech Acts Analysis, <i>JOLLT Journal of Languages and Language Teaching</i> , 14(4), 1402-1416. Doi: https://doi.org/10.33394/joltt.v14i4.19344	

Copyright © 2026, Yasir Mubarak et al.

This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY-SA](#) License



INTRODUCTION

Language plays a crucial role in international politics. This role is reflected not only in state actions themselves, but also in how those actions are communicated, framed, and justified through language (Al-Tarawneh et al., 2024; Kasman et al., 2025; Rahmani & Saeed, 2024). In international relations, political language functions as a strategic tool to construct meaning, shape perspectives, and legitimize state policies (Prasetya, 2024; Rahmani & Saeed, 2024). As argued by Edelman (1985), political language does not merely describe reality but actively helps to create it, particularly when public policies generate controversy and resistance. For this reason, the study of language in political discourse is essential for

understanding how power, authority, and legitimacy are constructed and maintained through discursive practices.

In the current context of international politics, the United States was reported to have conducted a military operation against Venezuela on January 3, 2026, which resulted in the arrest of President Nicolás Maduro (Nurhadi, 2026; Putra, 2026). The U.S. government portrayed the operation as a law enforcement effort aimed at addressing allegations of narco-terrorism and protecting national security (Dinilhaq, 2026; tvOneNews, 2026). However, the action generated diverse international responses, including criticism concerning potential violations of international law and Venezuelan state sovereignty (Greene, 2026; Martina et al., 2026; Ozkan, 2026). This study does not seek to assess the factual accuracy or legal validity of the operation. Instead, it treats the event as a discursive phenomenon, in which military action is publicly framed, justified, and legitimized through an official speech delivered by the head of state.

Presidential speeches play a critical role in politically sensitive situations. Such speeches do not merely convey information, but also construct narratives, frame events, and shape how the public understands and evaluates state actions (Fareh et al., 2025; P. Utami et al., 2025). Within pragmatic studies, particularly speech act theory introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1979), language is viewed as a form of social action rather than a neutral medium (Cavanaugh, 2020; R. Utami & Rizal, 2022). Every utterance in a political speech serves a specific function, such as justifying policy, asserting authority, or mobilizing public support. Accordingly, presidential speeches can be understood as a series of strategically deployed speech acts designed to influence public perception and build political legitimacy (Imran et al., 2024; Shamim et al., 2025).

In line with this perspective, political legitimacy does not emerge automatically from state actions, but is produced and negotiated through discourse. van Leeuwen (2007) identifies four main strategies of legitimation: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. These strategies enable political actors to frame actions as legitimate by invoking authority, appealing to moral values, presenting actions as rational and necessary, or reinforcing them through narratives of reward and punishment. This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing presidential speeches delivered after military operations, as such speeches constitute a primary discursive space in which the state explains why and on what grounds military action has been taken.

Political legitimacy has increasingly become a central concern in recent studies of political pragmatics, particularly in situations involving war, military intervention, and international crises. Recent scholarship demonstrates that political leaders strategically employ language not only to inform audiences but also to justify controversial policies, construct moral authority, manage public emotions, and mobilize domestic as well as international support (Hart & Fuoli, 2020; Marsen & Ali-Chand, 2022; Montiel et al., 2021; Wang, 2022). Within this perspective, presidential speeches constitute an institutional form of crisis communication in which linguistic choices function as pragmatic resources for constructing legitimacy rather than merely conveying factual information. Consequently, political discourse should be understood as a dynamic process through which governments negotiate public acceptance of military and security policies.

Recent research further indicates that speech acts constitute one of the principal pragmatic mechanisms through which political leaders legitimize military action. Hart and Fuoli (2020) demonstrate that political speakers employ objectification strategies to present military intervention as objective, rational, and inevitable rather than as subjective political choices. Similarly, Minoo et al. (2018) show that President Obama's speeches concerning ISIS relied extensively on assertive, commissive, and directive speech acts to persuade audiences while simultaneously legitimizing military operations. These findings suggest that

illocutionary acts are not merely linguistic classifications but strategic pragmatic resources through which political authority and legitimacy are discursively constructed.

Parallel developments have also emerged in studies of legitimation discourse and military intervention rhetoric. Elnakkouzi (2024) argues that rescue narratives operate as argumentative devices for justifying the use of military force by portraying intervention as a humanitarian necessity. Likewise, Yasmin (2024), Allison (2024), Alexandrovna and Andreevna (2025), and Degaf and Ashfiya (2025) demonstrate that presidential speeches consistently employ strategies such as positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, historical analogies, moral evaluation, and rationalization to construct the legitimacy of war and military intervention. Similarly, Sabir and Naeem (2025) show that official political and military statements contribute to the construction of nationalist narratives that reinforce governmental authority during periods of international conflict. Collectively, these studies confirm that political legitimacy is produced through multiple discursive strategies that integrate rhetorical, ideological, and pragmatic resources.

Despite these important advances, previous studies have predominantly adopted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), rhetorical analysis, or ideological approaches to examine political speeches (Allison, 2024; Degaf & Ashfiya, 2025; Alexandrovna & Andreevna, 2024; Yasmin, 2024). These approaches successfully reveal macro-level ideological patterns, narrative structures, and power relations underlying political discourse. However, they provide relatively limited explanations of how legitimacy is pragmatically constructed through individual illocutionary acts during a single communicative event. Conversely, studies employing speech act theory have generally focused on persuasion, emotional appeals, or crisis management (Abdurehmanova, 2025; Marsen & Ali-Chand, 2022; Minoo et al., 2018), while paying comparatively little attention to how illocutionary forces interact systematically with legitimation strategies in presidential discourse concerning military intervention. Consequently, an important theoretical gap remains between micro-level pragmatic analysis and macro-level explanations of political legitimacy.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating Searle's (1979) illocutionary speech act theory with van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework to explain how legitimacy is pragmatically constructed in presidential wartime discourse. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine ideological representation, rhetorical strategies, or discourse structures at the macro level, this study focuses on the micro-pragmatic functions of individual illocutionary acts and demonstrates how these linguistic actions collectively generate political legitimacy for military intervention. Accordingly, the study contributes to political pragmatics by bridging speech act theory and legitimation discourse within the context of international political communication during military crises.

Accordingly, this study is guided by three interrelated research questions. First, it investigates the types of illocutionary speech acts employed by President Donald Trump in his presidential address following the U.S. military operation against Venezuela. Second, it examines the pragmatic functions performed by these illocutionary speech acts within the speech, focusing on how they convey intentions, shape audience interpretation, and achieve communicative purposes. Third, it explores how the use of illocutionary speech acts contributes to the discursive construction of legitimacy for the military intervention, particularly in terms of justifying the use of force, persuading domestic and international audiences, and reinforcing the political rationale underlying the administration's actions.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a single-case study design to examine how political legitimacy is constructed through illocutionary speech acts in President Donald Trump's address following the U.S. military operation against Venezuela.

The analysis integrated Searle's (1979) classification of illocutionary speech acts with van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of legitimation strategies. This approach enabled an examination of how linguistic choices function to justify military action, establish authority, and shape public perceptions within a specific political context.

Data Source

The data were obtained from President Donald Trump's post-operation address, broadcast by CNBC Television and published on YouTube (CNBC Television, 2026). The 58-minute-and-41-second speech was selected because it provides an official political account of the military intervention. The verbal data were transcribed and segmented into 295 clauses, each representing a unit of analysis with a dominant illocutionary function. Complex utterances were separated when they contained distinct predications and communicative functions. As the speech was publicly accessible, the data were used for academic purposes with appropriate source acknowledgment and contextual accuracy.

Research Instrument

A structured coding rubric based on Searle (1979) and van Leeuwen (2007) served as the primary research instrument. The rubric classified clauses into five illocutionary categories: assertive, expressive, commissive, directive, and declarative, and four legitimation strategies: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Classification followed predefined operational criteria and considered communicative intention, linguistic indicators, and contextual meaning. Coding consistency was strengthened through repeated examination of ambiguous clauses, theoretical triangulation, and documentation of analytical decisions.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection began by obtaining the publicly available speech video from YouTube. The speech was transcribed using automatic captions as an initial reference, followed by manual verification against the original audio to ensure transcription accuracy. Nonessential fillers and pauses were removed without altering pragmatic meaning. The verified transcript was then segmented into clauses and assigned identification numbers. Each clause was documented in a coding spreadsheet containing its transcript location, illocutionary category, legitimation strategy, and contextual interpretation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two main stages. First, each clause was classified according to its dominant illocutionary force using Searle's (1979) framework. Second, the classified clauses were examined through van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework to identify how speech acts contributed to authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. The two stages were conducted separately to minimize circular interpretation. Coding results were subsequently reviewed against the original transcript and surrounding discourse to ensure consistency and analytical credibility. The findings were interpreted qualitatively, supported by descriptive frequencies, to explain how different speech acts contribute to the discursive construction of political legitimacy. Given the single-case design, the findings emphasize contextual interpretation rather than statistical generalization.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

This section presents the findings of the analysis of illocutionary speech acts in the post-military operation address delivered by the President of the United States, Donald Trump, following the military intervention against Venezuela. The findings are classified based on Searle's (1979) theory of illocutionary speech acts, which includes assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts, and van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework, encompassing authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis.

The analysis of President Donald Trump's address following the U.S. military operation against Venezuela yielded a total of 295 clauses. All clauses were classified according to Searle's (1979) framework of illocutionary speech acts.

Generally, the analysis reveals four principal findings that directly address the research questions. First, assertive speech acts constitute the dominant illocutionary category, indicating that the presidential address primarily functions to present and reinforce the official narrative of the military operation. Second, these assertive acts are predominantly associated with rationalization, framing the operation as reasonable, effective, and necessary. Third, declarative and expressive speech acts contribute mainly to authorization and moral evaluation by reinforcing institutional authority and constructing ethical distinctions between the United States and its opponent. Finally, directive speech acts occur relatively infrequently and mainly function as warning-based mythopoesis through narratives of deterrence and future consequences. The detailed distribution of illocutionary speech acts is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of Illocutionary Speech Act Types

No	Illocutionary Speech Act	Number of Clauses	Percentage
1.	Assertive	206	69.8%
2.	Expressive	42	14.2%
3.	Commissive	37	12.5%
4.	Directive	7	2.4%
5.	Declarative	3	1.0%
Total		295	100%

As shown in Table 1, assertive speech acts account for 206 of the 295 analyzed clauses (69.8%), making them by far the dominant illocutionary category. This finding directly addresses the first research question by demonstrating that the presidential address relies primarily on assertive acts to construct the official representation of the military operation. Expressive speech acts rank second (14.2%), followed by commissive (12.5%), directive (2.4%), and declarative (1.0%) speech acts. These quantitative patterns provide an overview of the linguistic distribution that is examined qualitatively in the following subsections through the integration of speech act analysis and legitimation strategies.

Because assertive speech acts constitute nearly seventy percent of the dataset, they are presented first, followed by the remaining illocutionary categories according to their frequency. Each category is subsequently interpreted in relation to van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework to explain how micro-level speech acts contribute to macro-level constructions of political legitimacy.

Table 2
Representative Illocutionary Speech Acts and Their Pragmatic Interpretations

Datum	Speech Act	Utterance	Brief Interpretation
1	Assertive	"Late last night and early today, at my direction, the United States Armed Forces conducted an extraordinary military operation in the capital of Venezuela."	Reports military action while emphasizing presidential authority.
2	Assertive	"All Venezuelan military capacities were rendered powerless."	Presents the operation as militarily successful.
3	Assertive	"Not a single American service member was killed, and not a single piece of American equipment was lost."	Emphasizes operational safety and effectiveness.
4	Assertive	"The illegitimate dictator, Maduro, was the kingpin of a vast criminal network responsible	Constructs Maduro as a criminal threat to

Datum	Speech Act	Utterance	Brief Interpretation
		for trafficking colossal amounts of deadly and illicit drugs into the United States.”	justify intervention.
5	Assertive	“It was an attack for justice.”	Frames military action as morally justified.
6	Assertive	“Hundreds of thousands over the years of Americans died because of him.”	Attributes severe consequences to Maduro to justify intervention.
7	Assertive	“The oil business in Venezuela has been a bust, a total bust for a long period of time.”	Portrays Venezuela's economic management as ineffective.
8	Assertive	“We were prepared to do a second wave if we needed to do so.”	Emphasizes military readiness for possible escalation.
9	Assertive	“In Venezuela, people are free.”	Presents freedom as an outcome of intervention.
10	Assertive	“It will also make the many, many people from Venezuela that are living in the United States extremely happy.”	Predicts positive public reactions to strengthen legitimacy.
11	Expressive	“I want to thank the men and women of our military who achieved such an extraordinary success.”	Expresses gratitude and reinforces military solidarity.
12	Expressive	“So I want to thank the National Guard.”	Recognizes institutional contributions.
13	Expressive	“And I want to thank law enforcement.”	Strengthens appreciation for law enforcement institutions.
14	Expressive	“...the place that we're very proud of is Washington, D.C., because it's our nation's capital.”	Reinforces national pride and identity.
15	Expressive	“We want peace, liberty, and justice for the great people of Venezuela.”	Constructs a humanitarian image through moral values.
16	Expressive	“They were brutal.”	Condemns opponents through negative moral evaluation.
17	Commissive	“We're going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper, and judicious transition.”	Promises temporary governance and an orderly transition.
18	Commissive	“We will crash the cartels.”	Commits to eliminating criminal threats.
19	Commissive	“and we will defend our citizens against all threats, foreign and domestic.”	Reinforces commitment to national security.
20	Commissive	“And we are ready to stage a second and much larger attack if we need to do so.”	Signals conditional commitment to further military action.
21	Directive	“This extremely successful operation should serve as a warning to anyone who would threaten American sovereignty or endanger American	Discourages potential threats through deterrence.

Datum	Speech Act	Utterance	Brief Interpretation
		lives.”	
22	Directive	“All political and military figures in Venezuela should understand what happened to Maduro can happen to them.”	Warns opponents about possible consequences.
23	Directive	“But think of that, not one piece of military equipment was lost.”	Directs attention toward operational success.
24	Declarative	“both of whom now face American justice.”	Affirms American legal authority over the individuals.
25	Declarative	“Very importantly, the embargo on all Venezuelan oil remains in full effect.”	Reaffirms the continuing enforcement of state policy.

Note. The table presents 25 representative utterances selected from 295 analyzed clauses. Speech act classifications follow the original research coding based on Searle (1979).

Identification of Legitimization in Discourse and Communication

Drawing on van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of legitimation—authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis—the findings show that President Donald Trump's speech following the military operation against Venezuela constructs policy legitimacy primarily through a combination of authorization, moral evaluation, and rationalization. Mythopoesis appears only to a limited extent, mainly in the form of cautionary narratives.

In terms of authorization, legitimacy is established through references to both personal and institutional authority. In Datum 1, the phrase “*at my direction*” positions the speaker as the central decision-maker and the primary source of legitimacy; the military operation is presented as lawful because it originates from the highest authority. This form of authorization is then extended into more impersonal and institutionalized forms through declarative speech acts, such as Datum 24 (“*now face American justice*”), which asserts a change in the legal status of the opposing party, and Datum 25 (“*the embargo ... remains in full effect*”), which affirms the embargo policy as a binding institutional reality. In this way, the speech shifts the question from “why was this action taken?” to “this action is legitimate because it was decided and enforced by authorized institutions,” guiding the audience to interpret the military operation as a normal and legitimate act of the state.

Moral evaluation, meanwhile, is strongly articulated through labeling, evaluation, and the moralization of action in order to monopolize the ethical high ground. In Datum 4, Maduro is labeled an “*illegitimate dictator*” and a “*kingpin*” of a criminal narcotics network; these labels function as moral delegitimation, transforming a political conflict into a moral one between agents of justice and perpetrators of crime. In Datum 16 (“*They were brutal*”), moral condemnation is condensed into a single evaluative adjective that positions the opposing side as an immoral “other.” At the same time, the military action itself is moralized as a righteous act through Datum 5 (“*an attack for justice*”), which discursively shifts the meaning of “attack” from aggression to the enforcement of values. Expressive statements such as Datum 15 (“*We want peace, liberty, and justice for the great people of Venezuela*”) further reinforce moral evaluation by constructing a humanitarian and empathetic image, while simultaneously separating “the people of Venezuela” from “the regime.” Through this distinction, the “self” is presented as the defender of universal values, whereas the “other” is framed as the source of oppression and disorder.

The third category, rationalization, appears to be the most dominant, in line with the prevalence of assertive speech acts. The speech legitimizes the military operation through

instrumental rationalization based on outcomes and effectiveness. Datum 2 (“*rendered powerless*”) and Datum 3 (“*Not a single ... was killed ... equipment was lost*”) emphasize results: the operation is framed as legitimate because it was successful, controlled, and involved minimal losses. This pattern shifts justification away from potentially contestable moral arguments toward a utilitarian logic: “the action is legitimate because it worked and was safe.” Theoretical rationalization also emerges through causal claims and conditions presented as “the way the world works,” such as Datum 6 (“*Americans died because of him*”), which establishes a cause–effect relationship to justify the necessity of action, and Datum 7, which refers to the failure of Venezuela’s oil industry to further delegitimize the regime through claims of structural incompetence. Forward-looking rationalization is extended through commissive statements in Datum 17–20, including commitments to govern until a safe transition, dismantle cartels, protect civilians, and prepare for further strikes. These promises construct the policy as goal-oriented, instrumental, and security-driven, ensuring that legitimacy does not end with “the attack has happened” but is projected as a rational sequence of actions aimed at stability.

Mythopoesis, by contrast, does not appear in the data as a full narrative with an extended plot, but rather as a concise narrative pattern that embeds a logic of reward and punishment. This is most evident in directives framed as warnings, such as Datum 21 (“*should serve as a warning*”) and Datum 22 (“*what happened to Maduro can happen to them*”). This structure resembles a cautionary tale: anyone who poses a threat will face similar consequences. As a result, military action is not only rationally justified but also used to discipline others through implicit threat. Even the sequence of assertive statements in Datum 1–3 can be read as a “mini moral tale” in policy form: the leader gives the order, the operation is carried out, and the outcome is successful with no losses—an implicit narrative that rewards the “right” action (state intervention) with positive results and closes off space for criticism.

Taken as a whole, when read through van Leeuwen’s (2007) framework, Trump’s speech constructs the legitimacy of the military operation through authorization (presidential and state institutional authority), reinforced by moral evaluation (the ethical positioning of “justice versus criminality/brutality”), and normalized through rationalization (effectiveness, security, strategic goals, and causal claims). Mythopoesis functions as an additional layer in the form of narrative warnings that emphasize consequences for opponents. Together, these strategies guide the audience to accept the military action as lawful, necessary, and moral, while simultaneously fixing the identity opposition between a “self” portrayed as protector and enforcer of values and an “other” framed as a threat and source of crime.

Discussion

In general, the findings indicate that the legitimation of military action in President Donald Trump’s speech following the military operation against Venezuela is constructed through a strategic combination of illocutionary speech acts. These speech acts operate at the micro level to generate legitimation effects at the macro level of international political discourse. The central finding of this study is the dominance of assertive speech acts (69.8%), suggesting that the presidential speech is primarily used to state, report, and affirm the state’s official version of the military operation. This pattern is consistent with earlier research arguing that assertives are commonly used to convey information, present facts, and make claims about reality. In political discourse, assertive speech acts play a crucial role because they help establish the speaker’s position while simultaneously persuading audiences (Alemi et al., 2018; Kissine, 2008; Ybañez et al., 2025).

Previous studies also show that political leaders frequently rely on assertive speech acts to legitimize policy and shape public perception. President Barack Obama, for instance, often used assertive statements to justify military actions and policies and to secure public support

(Alemi et al., 2018). A similar pattern appears in President Duterte's State of the Nation Address, where assertives dominate as a means to reinforce governmental authority and influence public perceptions (Ybañez et al., 2025). Likewise, President Goodluck Jonathan employed assertive speech acts to emphasize national unity and stability as part of his commitment to peace and democracy (Koussouhon & Dadjo, 2016).

Within van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework, this dominance of assertives directly supports rationalization, particularly instrumental rationalization based on outcomes and effectiveness. Clauses emphasizing operational success, the absence of casualties, and the complete neutralization of Venezuela's military function to frame military action as reasonable, safe, and necessary. This reinforces Edelman's (1985) argument that political language does not merely reflect objective reality but actively produces political reality. Through language, events are constructed as sensible and legitimate, while alternative meanings—such as suffering, inequality, or geopolitical interests—are marginalized. In this sense, what appears as a “rational reason” is not necessarily a guarantee of substantive truth, but rather a symbolic strategy shaped by audience interests and expectations. In the present findings, political language constructs reality by shifting public attention from normative questions (“is this legitimate?”) to technical questions (“did this work?”). Legitimacy, therefore, is built not mainly through legal argumentation, but through utilitarian and technocratic claims.

Although declarative speech acts are not frequent, their role is highly significant. This pattern corresponds to Searle's (1979) concept of declaratives—utterances that directly bring about changes in status or external conditions simply by being spoken by an actor with institutional authority. In other words, social reality changes because the utterance is produced by a legitimately authorized speaker. This highlights the performative nature of declaratives, where the act of speaking itself constitutes the change in status or condition of an object or situation (Linhares, 2025; Nolan, 2019). In this view, declarations are understood as speech acts that bring about a change in the external situation via their utterance, as seen in social practices such as resigning, christening, appointing, and sentencing, all of which performatively alter social status (Kabalmay & Susanto, 2025). Declaratives also function to transform the “status quo” when certain conditions are met, including the presence of authority, an appropriate context, and correct institutional procedures (Rongyu, 2024). In Trump's speech, declaratives—such as assigning Maduro a legal status and reaffirming the oil embargo—illustrate how legitimacy is built through authorization.

Declaratives in political speech do not function merely as linguistic tools, but also as symbolic mechanisms through which political action is enacted and legitimized (Kohn, 2023). Trump does not only report policy; he symbolically performs policy through speech, as conceptualized by Searle (1979). In this context, declarative sentences become a key means to establish and reinforce the speaker's authority and credibility, similar to how President Joe Biden's language practices emphasize ethos-based rhetoric as a foundation for leadership legitimacy and presidential status (Strukowska, 2024). Accordingly, declaratives in state speeches do not merely mark moments of important decisions; they also serve as a primary means of performing authority (Itani, 2025). This is consistent with Itani's (2025) analysis of Netanyahu's speeches, which demonstrates that although declaratives are limited in number, their strategic use can project a leader who is decisive, authoritative, and action-oriented. Therefore, presidential speech can be understood as a discursive space where personal and institutional authority converge to produce and consolidate state legitimacy.

Expressive speech acts occupy the second-largest category and play an important role in building moral evaluation. Through gratitude to the military, sympathy toward the Venezuelan people, and condemnation of the Maduro regime, the speech constructs a clear moral dichotomy between “self” and “other.” Within van Leeuwen's (2007) framework,

labels such as “*illegitimate dictator*” and “*brutal*” function as moral delegitimization of the opponent, while expressions such as “*attack for justice*” and “*peace, liberty, and justice*” moralize military action as right and universally valuable. This pattern aligns with Zhao (2023), who shows that “us/them” opposition is built by emphasizing negative moral attributions to “them” (e.g., irresponsible actors, threats, or sources of problems), while simultaneously constructing “us” as moral, rational, and committed to universal values such as justice, security, and humanity. Related studies similarly argue that in-groups are typically represented positively through emphasis on virtue, strength, and moral superiority, whereas out-groups are represented negatively by highlighting threat, weakness, and moral failure (Amirian et al., 2012; Bamgbose & Babalola, 2024; Nigatu & Admassu, 2023; Rababah & Hamdan, 2019).

In analyses of political speeches—such as those by Israeli and Palestinian leaders—the Us/Them dichotomy becomes visible when each leader depicts their own group as honorable and the other as a threat through specific grammatical choices (Rababah & Hamdan, 2019). Comparable patterns also appear in media discourse, where the Us/Them distinction is used to frame conflict and social issues; for example, American and Indian newspapers portray the Russia–Ukraine conflict differently depending on their geopolitical interests and cultural values (Sun, 2024). At the linguistic level, lexical choices—through particular words and phrases—function to build positive or negative representations of the actors involved (Nigatu & Admassu, 2023). These findings demonstrate concretely how moral evaluation is realized through specific illocutionary speech acts at the clause level.

Commissive and directive speech acts, although not quantitatively dominant, play an important role in building future orientation and narrative discipline. Commissives function to signal policy continuity and state commitment to future courses of action, consistent with Piscesco and Ambalegin (2023), who show that commissives—such as promises, threats, and guarantees—in presidential campaign speeches reflect a speaker’s commitment to a proposed political agenda and an anticipated future. More broadly, speech acts, including commissives, form part of rhetorical strategies in political speech aimed at influencing public opinion, building legitimacy, and promoting particular ideas and policies (Dylgjeri, 2017). Directive speech acts—especially those framed as warnings—not only guide audience behavior but also realize mythopoesis in the form of reward–punishment narratives. The influence of directives becomes stronger when produced by political elites such as presidents, given that presidential speech is a strategic channel for shaping public opinion and signaling to other political stakeholders (Azwar & Minto, 2023). Thus, although less prominent in frequency, commissives and directives contribute significantly to future orientation and narrative discipline in political discourse.

These findings are consistent with scholarship emphasizing the function of post-crisis speeches as tools of deterrence and signaling. Smith (2005) shows that presidential speeches after crises often aim to reassure the public while providing clear policy direction; for example, after the September 11 attacks, President Bush’s rhetoric framed the event as part of a broader moral conflict against evil, projecting a firm stance against terrorism and signaling deterrence against further attacks. This signaling effect is strengthened by charismatic rhetoric in post-crisis speeches, which can unify the nation and communicate messages of strength and resilience to domestic and international audiences (Bligh et al., 2004). However, this study adds to that literature by demonstrating that such disciplinary effects do not operate only at the level of content or macro framing. Pragmatically, they are realized through directive speech acts that function as implicit warnings. In other words, mythopoesis does not always appear as an extended story; it can work in condensed form through warning utterances that directly steer and constrain the behavior of others.

More broadly, the present findings suggest that state legitimacy is not constructed through a single rhetorical strategy but through the coordinated interaction of multiple pragmatic functions. Assertive speech acts provide rational explanations, declaratives institutionalize authority, expressives establish moral positioning, while directives and commissives project future-oriented commitments and deterrence. This interaction reflects what Elnakkouzi (2024) describes as the argumentative function of crisis narratives, in which language simultaneously explains, persuades, and legitimizes military intervention. It also supports Sabir and Naeem's (2025) argument that official political discourse actively constructs national narratives capable of mobilizing public support and reinforcing governmental authority during international conflicts.

Theoretically, this study supports Chilton's (2026) view that political and military legitimacy depends on institutional language practices. Integrating Searle's (1979) speech act analysis with van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework enables a more concrete understanding of how legitimacy is produced through language, bridging micro-pragmatic analysis and macro-level constructions of legitimacy in international politics. Thus, the study not only reinforces prior findings but also offers a methodological contribution by showing that legitimacy can be systematically traced through speech act choices within a single official state communication event.

The findings also indicate several directions for future research. Because this study focuses on a single presidential address, subsequent studies could investigate larger corpora consisting of multiple presidential speeches, parliamentary debates, official press briefings, or media responses in order to examine the consistency and variation of pragmatic legitimation strategies across communicative contexts. Generally, this study contributes to political pragmatics by demonstrating that the integration of Searle's (1979) speech act theory with van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework provides a systematic analytical model for explaining how language constructs political legitimacy. Rather than treating legitimacy as a purely ideological or rhetorical phenomenon, the study shows that legitimacy emerges through coordinated patterns of illocutionary force operating across multiple levels of political discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study shows how Trump's post-operation address uses speech acts to justify military intervention. Assertive acts are the most common, presenting the government's account and describing the operation as necessary and effective. Statements classified as declaratives emphasize presidential and institutional authority. Expressive acts present American actions positively and opponents negatively, while commissive acts promise security and stability. Directive acts warn opponents about the possible consequences of their actions. Together, these speech acts frame the intervention as justified through authority, moral values, practical reasons, and warnings. Combining Searle's (1979) speech act theory with van Leeuwen's (2007) framework helps explain how individual statements support broader political justifications. The study shows how different speech acts work together to present military action as acceptable. However, it examines how the speech justifies the operation, without determining whether the operation was lawful or whether audiences accepted its arguments. Because the analysis focuses on one speech, the findings cannot be generalized to all political contexts. Future studies should compare more speeches, government statements, and media responses to examine similar patterns and explore how audiences understand or challenge these justifications.

FUNDING

This research received no financial support from any public, commercial, or non-profit funding agency.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was not applicable because this study analyzed a publicly available presidential speech and involved no direct interaction with human participants or collection of private information.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original speech video is publicly available on CNBC Television's YouTube channel. The verified transcript, comprising 295 clauses, and the coding results are not stored in a public repository but may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to copyright restrictions and acknowledgment of the original source.

REFERENCES

- Abdurehmanova, K. E. (2025). Emotive speech acts in wartime rhetoric: a comparative analysis of presidential speeches. *Universidad y Sociedad*, 17(5), e5372–e5372.
- Alemi, M., Latifi, A., & Nematzadeh, A. (2018). Persuasion in political discourse: Barak Obama's presidential speeches against ISIS. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 22(2), 278–291. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9182-2018-22-2-278-291>
- Alexandrovna, S. O., & Andreevna, N. K. (2025). Just War: Critical Discourse Analysis of US Presidential Speeches. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 25(1), 387–402. <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v25i1.604>
- Allison, R. (2024). Russia's Case for War against Ukraine: Legal Claims, Political Rhetoric, and Instrumentality in a Fracturing International Order. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 71(3), 271–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2254915>
- Al-Tarawneh, A., Alhalalmeh, A.-H., & Al-Badawi, M. (2024). The Influence of Political Discourse Language on Worldwide Communication. In S. Reyad & A. Hannon (Eds.), *Frontiers of Human Centricity in the Artificial Intelligence-Driven Society 5.0* (pp. 1457–1468). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-73545-5_136
- Amirian, M. R., Rahimi, A., & Sami, G. (2012). A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Images of Iranians in Western Movies: The Case of Iranium. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 1(5), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.5p.1>
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.
- Azwar, R., & Minto, D. W. (2023). Tindak Tutur Direktif dalam Pidato Presiden RI pada sidang Tahunan MPR, DPR, dan DPD Tahun 2021 [Directive Speech Acts in the Speech of the President of the Republic of Indonesia at the 2021 Annual Session of the MPR, DPR, and DPD]. *EDUKATIF: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan*, 4(6), 8084–8095. <https://doi.org/10.31004/edukatif.v4i6.4039>
- Bamgbose, G. A., & Babalola, P. (2024). “Look at Lagosians and Say I Am Going to Be in Charge”: Ideologies in the 2019 Lagos State (Nigeria) Gubernatorial Debate. *The African Review*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1821889x-bja10109>
- Bligh, M. C., Kohles, J. C., & Meindl, J. R. (2004). Charisma under crisis: Presidential leadership, rhetoric, and media responses before and after the September 11th terrorist attacks. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(2), 211–239. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.02.005>
- Cavanaugh, J. R. (2020). Language as Social Action. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.013.119>
- Chilton, P. (2026). Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice. In *Analysing Political Discourse*. Routledge.

- CNBC Television. (2026, January 3). *President Trump speaks following the U.S. attack on Venezuela* — 1/3/2026 [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_8-WJLh62U
- Degaf, A., & Ashfiya, H. (2025). Moralizing War and Constructing Enemies in Trump's 2025 Iran Speech. *PARADIGM: Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 8(2), 19–41.
- Dinilhaq, A. (2026, January 3). Kronologi penangkapan Presiden Venezuela Maduro lewat operasi kilat AS [Chronology of the Arrest of Venezuelan President Maduro through a Swift U.S. Operation]. *BeritaSatu.Com*. <https://www.beritasatu.com/internasional/2955025/kronologi-penangkapan-presiden-venezuela-maduro-lewat-operasi-kilat-as>
- Dylgjeri, A. (2017). Analysis of speech acts in political speeches. *European Journal of Social Sciences Studies*, 2(2), 19–26. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.46827/ejsss.v0i0.66>
- Edelman, M. (1985). Political Language and Political Reality. *PS*, 18(1), 10–19. <https://doi.org/10.2307/418800>
- Elnakkouzi, R. (2024). The argumentative function of rescue narratives: Trump's national security rhetoric as a case study. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 21(1), 17–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2022.2095413>
- Fareh, S., Malkawi, R. J., Rabab'ah, G., & Alghazo, S. (2025). Framing Crisis Discourse in Biden's Political Speech: The Use of Persuasion to Rally Public Support. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique*, 38(7), 2293–2317. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-025-10292-x>
- Greene, C. (2026, January 6). U.S. criticized over Venezuela by allies and adversaries alike at U.N. meeting. *Time*. <https://time.com/7343348/trump-venezuela-maduro-un-security-council-meeting/>
- Hart, C., & Fuoli, M. (2020). Objectification strategies outperform subjectification strategies in military interventionist discourses. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 162, 17–28. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.03.004>
- Imran, I., Sultan, S., & Mayong, M. (2024). Wacana politik identitas dalam pidato calon presiden RI 2024 [Identity Politics Discourse in the Speeches of Indonesian Presidential Candidates for the 2024 Election]. *Jurnal Onoma: Pendidikan, Bahasa Dan Sastra*, 10(2), 1864–1876. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.30605/onoma.v10i2.3618>
- Itani, G. (2025). Beyond Mere Words: Unveiling the Speech Acts behind Netanyahu's October 7 Speech. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 15(02), 445–460. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2025.152025>
- Kabalmay, T., & Susanto, D. (2025). Speech Acts in Pragmatic Linguistics: A Conceptual Review and Its Applications. *Lexeme : Journal of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 271–278. <https://doi.org/10.32493/ljla.v7i2.48753>
- Kasman, N., Hanafi, M. H. M., Aswadi, A., & Kasman, R. (2025). Bahasa dan Politik dalam Wacana Global: Analisis Kritis Terhadap Framing, Retorika, dan Kekuasaan [Language and Politics in Global Discourse: A Critical Analysis of Framing, Rhetoric, and Power]. *Prosiding Kongres Internasional Masyarakat Linguistik Indonesia (KIMLI)*, 2025, 410–421. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.51817/kimli.v2025i.172>
- Kissine, M. (2008). Assertoric commitment *s*. *Belgian Journal of Linguistics*, 22, 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.1075/bjl.22.08kis>
- Kohn, A. (2023). Props as visual arguments in the political speeches of Binyamin Netanyahu. *Social Semiotics*, 33(2), 373–394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1865106>
- Koussouhon, L. A., & Dadjo, S. D. Y. (2016). Pragmatic Analyses of President Goodluck Jonathan's Concession Speech and General Muhammadu Buhari's Acceptance Speech: A Comparative Appraisal. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(4), 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.4p.12>

- Linhares, D. (2025). Directives and intentions. *Natural Language Semantics*, 33(2), 255–289. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11050-025-09232-z>
- Marsen, S., & Ali-Chand, Z. (2022). 'We all have a role to play': A comparative analysis of political speech acts on the COVID19 crisis in the South Pacific. *Communication Research and Practice*, 8(1), 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2022.2040701>
- Martina, M., Hunnicutt, T., & Brunnstrom, D. (2026, January 11). With Venezuela raid, US tells China to keep away from the Americas. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/with-venezuela-raid-us-tells-china-keep-away-americas-2026-01-11/>
- Minoo, A., Ashkan, L., & Arash, N. (2018). Persuasion in political discourse: Barak Obama's presidential speeches against ISIS. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 22(2), 278–291. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9182-2018-22-2-278-291>
- Montiel, C. J., Uyheng, J., & Dela Paz, E. (2021). The Language of Pandemic Leaderships: Mapping Political Rhetoric During the COVID-19 Outbreak. *Political Psychology*, 42(5), 747–766. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12753>
- Nigatu, B. A., & Admassu, M. T. (2023). Critical discourse analysis of the second inaugural speech of Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2172805>
- Nolan, B. (2019). The role of context and common ground in utterance meaning with assertive and declarative speech acts of Irish. In M. Bloch-Trojnar & M. Ó. Fionnáin (Eds.), *Centres and Peripheries in Celtic Linguistics*. Peter Lang.
- Nurhadi, M. (2026, January 4). Kenapa AS serang Venezuela dan tangkap Presiden Maduro? Ini penjelasannya [Why Did the U.S. Attack Venezuela and Arrest President Maduro? Here Is the Explanation]. *Suara.Com*. <https://www.suara.com/bisnis/2026/01/04/070853/kenapa-as-serang-venezuela-dan-tangkap-presiden-maduro-ini-penjasannya>
- Ozkan, M. (2026, January 6). Africa voices solidarity with Venezuela after US military operation targeting Maduro. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/africa-voices-solidarity-with-venezuela-after-us-military-operation-targeting-maduro/3791597>
- Piscesco, P. O., & Ambalegin, A. (2023). The Commissive Acts in Joe Biden's Inauguration Speech. *EScience Humanity Journal*, 4(1), 55–62. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.37296/esci.v4i1.66>
- Prasetya, R. (2024). Analyzing Political Discourse: Linguistic and Semiotic Perspectives. *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs*, 12(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.35248/2332-0761.24.12.044>
- Putra, N. P. (2026, January 4). Mengenal Operation Absolute Resolve, operasi senyap AS untuk tangkap Maduro [Understanding Operation Absolute Resolve, the U.S. Covert Operation to Capture Maduro]. *Liputan6.Com*. <https://www.liputan6.com/global/read/6250163/mengenal-operation-absolute-resolve-operasi-senyap-as-untuk-tangkap-maduro>
- Rababah, A. G., & Hamdan, J. M. (2019). A Contrastive Critical Discourse Analysis of Netanyahu's and Abbas's Speeches on the Gaza War (2014). *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 10(1), 178. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1001.20>
- Rahmani, H., & Saeed, A. R. (2024). The power of language: Exploring the role of language in politics. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8(8), 2063–2073. <https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8080152>
- Rongyu, X. (2024). An analysis of conversation from the perspective of speech act theory: Taking Frozen as an example. *Lecture Notes on Language and Literature*, 7(2), 24–29. <https://doi.org/10.23977/langl.2024.070205>

- Sabir, M., & Naeem, W. (2025). Power and language in a time of conflict: A critical discourse analysis of Indian and Pakistani political and military rhetoric during bilateral tensions. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*, 9(3), 282–295. [https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2025\(9-III\)25](https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2025(9-III)25)
- Searle, J. R. (1979). *Expression and meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shamim, M., Bushra, B., & Dwivedi, V. K. (2025). Language and power: A critical discourse analysis of political speeches. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 10(2), 459–468. <https://doi.org/10.25215/2455/1002044>
- Smith, C. A. (2005). President Bush's Enthymeme of Evil. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(1), 32–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205279432>
- Strukowska, M. E. (2024). Exploring Speech Act Patterns In Anthropological Pragmatics. *LINGUISTICA SILESIANA*, 215–236. <https://doi.org/10.24425/linsi.2024.150397>
- Sun, Y. (2024). The Russia-Ukraine conflict as a discursive continuum: A comparative study of *Business Today* and *New York Times* using an extended corpus-based discourse-historical approach. *Journalism*, 25(12), 2702–2722. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231213502>
- Utami, P., Sitinjak, D. R., & Irwan, I. (2025). Analisis Retorika dan Strategi Komunikasi dalam Pidato Kenegaraan Presiden Prabowo pada Sidang Tahunan Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat (MPR) 2025 [Rhetorical Analysis and Communication Strategies in President Prabowo's State Address at the 2025 Annual Session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR)]. *Jurnal Media Akademik (JMA)*, 3(12), 1–18. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.62281/rmsse591>
- Utami, R., & Rizal, M. (2022). Bahasa dalam konteks sosial (peristiwa tutur dan tindak tutur) [language in Social Contexts (Speech Events and Speech Acts)]. *JUMPER: Journal of Educational Multidisciplinary Research*, 1(1), 16–25. <https://doi.org/10.56921/jumper.v1i1.36>
- van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication*, 1(1), 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986>
- Wang, Y. (2022). Legitimation Strategies in Political Rhetoric: Examples From Presidential Speeches on Covid-19. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(5), 894–903. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1205.09>
- Yasmin, M. (2024). (De-)Legitimizing War: a linguistic analysis of Indian and Pakistani civil and military conflict discourses. *Critical Military Studies*, 10(1), 61–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2023.2188997>
- Ybañez, M. S., Punzalan, M., Amante, I., Lariosa, G. E., Castellano, J., & Banguis, R. (2025). Governance in the Digital Sphere: A Speech Act Analysis of Presidential State of the Nation Addresses. *International Journal on Culture, History, and Religion*, 7(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.63931/ijchr.v7iSI2.190>
- Zhao, X. (2023). Constructing the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy through the notion of responsibility: An integrated framework. *Global Media and Communication*, 19(1), 119–138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231161805>