An Analysis of Donald Trump's 2020 RNC Speech from the Perspective of Proximization Theory

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Abstract—The cognitive turn of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) marks the commencement of Critical Cognitive Linguistics (CCL), offering a disciplined theoretical perspective on the conceptualized linguistic choices which are identified as potentially ideological. Based on the newly developed theory of proximization in CCL, this paper sets out to analyze Donald Trump's Speech delivered at 2020 Republican National Convention. It finds out that the former U.S. president Donald Trump is most skilled at construing spatial proximization in the discourse space to legitimate his behavior and ideological manipulation is subtly achieved by him through his combined use of spacial, temporal and axiological proximization strategies.

Index Terms—Political discourse, proximization theory, spatial-temporal-axiological model

I. INTRODUCTION

Sharing Foucault's dialectical view of discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) studies the relationship between language and power. CDA scholars commonly view language as a form of social practice, and are concerned with systematically investigating hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse. As one of the most vigorous study field, CDA is interdisciplinary in nature. On the one hand, it always receives input from social science; on the other hand, it constantly adopts newly developed linguistic research method. In recent years, with the development of cognitive science and cognitive linguistics, there is also a cognitive turn of CDA. The cognitive approach to CDA offers a disciplined theoretical perspective on the conceptualized linguistic choices which are identified as potentially ideological. It thus affords a new and promising perspective on persuasive, manipulative properties of discourse, worldview and conceptualization [1]. The synergy of CDA and Cognitive Linguistics marks the commencement of Critical Cognitive Linguistics (CCL).

Proposed by Cap [2], the proximization theory is an important theory in CCL. Aside from combining views from cognitive linguistics and critical discourse studies, the theory also fits for corpus-based investigation, reflecting the new trend of interdisciplinary research and has attracted a lot of scholarly attention. In its most general and practical sense, the term proximization refers to a discursive strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant events or states of affairs (including "distant" adversarial ideologies) as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and his/her addressee. Cap states that the sense of proximization is construed mainly from three dimensions, namely, space,

time as well as value and develops Spatial-Temporal-Axiological (STA) model, which has proven its validity of discourse study.

The theory of proximization has developed steadily abroad and obtained great achievements since its launch in 2013. Scholars including Piotr Cap [2–8], Paul Chilton [9–11], Christopher Hart [12–14], Dunmire Patricia [15], and Anna Ewa Wieczorek [16] all makes their endeavour to push its further development. Since it is a relatively new concept, the domestic research on the proximization theory is still at the preliminary stage. In China, Wu [17] is the first one to give a thorough introduction and evaluation about this theory. Yet, his paper is more like a summary than expansion of what Cap has done. Another leading figure in this field is Zhang Hui who focuses his research on the discourse construction of conflict talks based on the theory of proximization [18]. However, current research mostly focuses on the theoretical introduction and literature reviews [17, 19], more specific case studies and empirical research of the related theory require to be done.

Given this situation, this paper sets out to investigate Donald Trump's political speech at 2020 Republican National Convention (RNC) as an address to his supporters on the South Lawn of the White House when he accepted the Republican nomination for president from the perspective of the proximization theory. Through combining the qualitative and quantitative method, it tries to answer these following research questions: (1). How does proximization theory work in political discourse? How are spatial, temporal and axiological proximizations manifested in Donald Trump's RNC Speech respectively? (2). What messages Donald Trump wants to convey through applying the proximization strategies? Hopefully, it can provide some insights into the critical cognitive study of the political discourse.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS

The concept of proximity was first approached by Chilton [9]. In his theory of discourse space, Chilton [9] claims that in processing any discourse, people are inclined to position other entities in their world by placing these entities in relation to themselves along with three axis: space, time and modality. Based on the discourse space theory of Chilton, Cap [6] proposed a more systematic and dynamic theory of cognitive pragmatics, namely, the proximization theory. This theory follows Chilton's idea of proximity and defines proximization as a forced construal operation meant to evoke closeness of the external threat [2]. The threat is said to come from the Outside-Deictic-Center (ODC) entities. ODC entities are conceptualized to be crossing the discourse space to invade the Inside-Deictic-Center (IDC) entities. According to Cap [2], this encroachment comes from three dimensions:

space, time and value, which sanctions the division of proximization into three aspects: spatial, temporal and axiological.

Spatial proximization refers to the process in which ODC entities gradually intruding IDC entities in the physical sense. As a strategic construal operation, spatial proximization always forces on ODC's destructive impact and argues that unless IDC takes pre-emptive action immediately, the impact will be inevitable and imminent. This sense of proximization manifests itself through the deployment of six specific categories of lexical-grammatical choices, as Table I shows:

TABLE I: SPACIAL PROXIMIZATION CATEGORIES [6]

Linguistic Elements	Categories Construed
Noun phrases (NPs)	Deictic center of IDCs
	Deictic center of ODCs
	Abstract concepts construed as anticipations of impact of ODCs upon IDCs
	Abstract concepts construed as effects of impact of ODCs upon IDCs
Verb phrases (VPs)	Motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs towards the deictic center
	Action construed as markers of impact of ODCs upon IDCs

Temporal Proximization takes "now" as the center of the temporal axis, and highlights that the threat is imminent by setting its basis on the occurrence of past crises or the expectations of future crises, thus insisting the threat is urgent and of historic significance, and measures to prevent the threat should be taken immediately. To be more specific, it is utilized by two concept shifts, which are past-to-present shift and future-to-present shift. The past-to-present shift emphasizes the effect of historical events and draws an analogy between the the past threat and current situation whereas the future-to-past shift stresses the anticipated negative future events caused by the deficiency of preventive measures. There are altogether five lexical-grammatical categories belong to the construal of temporal proximization, as Table II shows:

TABLE II: TEMPORAL PROXIMIZATION CATEGORIES [6]

Linguistic Elements	Categories Construed
Noun phrases (NPs)	Indefinite descriptions construing ODC actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames
	Nominalizations construing presupposition of conditions for ODC impact to arise anytime in the future
Verb phrases (VPs)	Modal auxiliaries construing conditions for ODC impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future
Discourse forms	Contrastive use of the simple past and the present perfect construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past instant
	Parallel contrastive construal of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the present

Axiological Proximization confirms to the fact that the listeners understand the hostility between the IDC entities and the ODC entities in the value system. Its operating mechanism is that positive values of IDC are threatened by

ODC's negative values and that with ideological conflicts continuing to intensify, there will eventually be some physical conflicts or personal injury. Three specific lexical-grammatical categories can clarify this axiological proximization, as Table III show:

TABLE III: AXIOLOGICAL PROXIMIZATION CATEGORIES [6]

Linguistic Elements	Categories Construed
Noun phrases (NPs)	IDC positive values or value sets (ideologies)
	ODC negative values or value sets (ideologies)
Discourse forms	Linear arrangement of lexical-grammatical phrases construing materialization in the IDC space of the ODC negative ideologies

In brief, proximization is essentially a discourse strategy to solicit legitimization of preventive measures. Through construing the threat from three dimensions, i.e., space, time and value, ideological manipulation can be achieved in a subtle manner.

III. METHODOLOGY

Based on the proximization theory, this paper plans to use STA model proposed by Cap [6] to analyze Donald Trump's 2020 RNC Speech. To clarify the discourse strategies used by this very speech deliver, it combines the quantitative and the qualitative research method. The research procedures are as follows.

First, according to the context of the speech, specific lexical-grammatical items that conform to the standard formulated by Cap [6] will be marked one by one through manual recognition. Then the frequency of these lexical-grammatical items of different categories will be calculated with the help of statistical tool AntConc. Finally, through elaborating on the quantitative results, the thesis will further conduct the qualitative inquiry to delineate the proximizational strategies employed and the ideologies hidden behind.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will be explaining Donald Trump's way of legitimating his action through applying proximization strategies in his speech delivered at 2020 RNC. Three dimensions of proximizing process will be attended to one by one.

A. Spatial Proximization and Discussion

Spatial proximization is the forced construal of the deictic-space-peripheral entities encroaching physically upon the central entities. As shown in Table IV, for center entities, the former U.S. president Donald Trump tends to visualize himself as the people's man, or to be exact, the man of American. In his speech, he keeps emphasizing his concern for the nation, his caring for the people. Noun phrases including "our nation", "we American people" frequently appear, which stress his bond with his addressees: they together share the nation and they are the loyal citizens of the country. He also points out that his party, namely, the Republican Party stays and grows with the States all the time

throughout the history. Elements helping to construe this center image account for 7.7% in total. However, on the other side, for the construal of the ODC or peripheral entities, his opponent's camp hits the highest frequency. Trump pictures his opponent Joe Biden and the party to which he belongs, the Democrat, to be against the people and the nation. They are in line with Washington insiders who share common invested interest and the radical left wing. Their actions are deemed as betrayals to American people. Danger and threat will be brought along by these ODC entities. They will be trespassing the discourse space of the center entities and corrode them. In addition, China and socialism are also construed here as outsiders who are ready to take IDC entities down. Together with Biden's betrayal and weakness, these discourse-space-peripheral entities keep encroaching the center of the discourse space.

Through activating the process of ODCs approaching as well as threatening IDCs, Trump makes his point clear that preventing ODCs which involve the Biden administration, China etc. from harming IDCs, namely America and its people is necessary and urgent. Trump states that while Biden teams up with the forces of reaction and being weak, he stays tough and committed himself to the country. It thus gives him the seemingly proper right to run the presidency again.

TABLE IV: SPACIAL PROXIMIZATION CONSTRUED IN THE SPEECH

Categories	Key items	Frequency
NPs construed as elements of the IDCs	I/my/we/our/people	5.17%
	America/American/ nation	2.27%
	Republican/ administration/party	0.27%
NPs construed as elements of the ODCs	Joe Biden/ Democrat/his supporters	0.72%
	Washington insiders/radical left/ left wing	0.25%
	China/socialist/com munism/socialism	0.34%
NPs denoting abstract concepts construed as anticipations of impact of ODCs upon IDCs	threat/danger/ darkness	0.21%
NPs denoting abstract concepts construed as effects of impact of ODCs upon IDCs	betrayal/damage	0.17%
VPs of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs toward IDCs	ODCs threaten IDCs/ODC inflict pain on IDCs	0.31%
	ODCs take advantage of IDCs	0.08%
VPs of action construed as markers of impact of ODCs upon IDCs	ODCs demolish/dismantle/ destroy/tear down IDCs	0.19%
Total		9.98%

B. Temporal Proximization and Discussion

Temporal proximization is the forced construal of the envisaged conflict as not only imminent, but also momentous, historic and thus immediate response and unique preventive measures are needed. From the Table V, Trump's delicate way of building the tension through construing the proximity in time can be detected. In his speech, Trump utilizes many items of temporal frames, such as "for forty-seven years", "last four years" and so on, to highlight the damages inflicted by Biden during his tenure. In addition to this, the use of modal auxiliaries demonstrates that these damages can continue growing worse if the situation stays unchanged. In the other world, in order to save the coming deterioration and to embrace a more promising future of the nation, Joe Biden has to come off the power as for his incompetence. Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construal of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the present are noticeable in Trump's speech as well, which again underlines the necessity of the rearrangement of the administration. The past-to-present shift and present-to-future shift both show that ODC's impacts need to be addressed right away and a new administration is wanted urgently. Trump avid for coming back to power is thus legitimated by the situation construed as he claims himself to be capable of fixing the past and present social ills and making the nation strong again. He has gained a foothold through his delicate portray.

TABLE V: TEMPORAL PROXIMIZATION CONSTRUED IN THE SPEECH

Categories	Key items	Frequency
NPs involving Indefinite descriptions construing ODC actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames	for forty-seven years/last four years/ next four years	0.14%
VPs involving modal auxiliaries construing conditions for ODC impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future	will/would/c ould/ may	0.43%
Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construal of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the present		0.23%
Total		0.80%

C. Axiological Proximization and Discussion

Axiological proximization involves construal of a gathering ideological clash between the home values of the deictic-central-entities and the alien antagonistic values. According to Table VI and the context of Trump's speech, Trump depicts people of the America as the one with faith and conviction whereas he refers to people from socialist countries as the those who value the "repressive mandates" and "soul-crushing conformity". By stigmatizing ODC's value sets, he provides deceptively sound reasons to repel these seemingly negative entities. In addition to the negative value of socialism, Trump argues that Biden's timidity is also here to be criticized and deserted. From Trump's perspective, America is a nation of confidence and progression but what

Biden did during his tenure is pusillanimous and will do harm to the national ethos. Therefore, to prevent these negative values from further encroaching on IDC, someone with true and positive American value sets should step out to cope with this ideological crisis and under these circumstances, otherwise the nation would fail to become great again.

TABLE VI: AXIOLOGICAL PROXIMIZATION CONSTRUED IN THE SPEECH

Categories	Key items	Frequency
NPs construed as IDC positive values or value sets	faith/conviction/confidence	0.12%
NPs construed as ODC negative values or value sets	Timidity/repressive mandates/soul-crushing conformity	0.14%
Total		0.26%

V. CONCLUSION

Proximization is a forced construal operation meant to evoke closeness of the external threat so as to solicit legitimization of preventive measures. Through examining Donald Trump's 2020 RNC Speech, the paper manages to answers the questions of how spatial proximization, temporal proximization and axiological proximization are used in politic discourse. It finds that Trump is good at using this discourse strategy to legitimate his action. Among three dimensions of proximity, the spacial one is favored by him the most, followed by the temporal one. Though spatial proximization and temporal proximization strategies are used more often than the axiological ones, they are combined to serve for the construal of axiological proximization, and the axiological proximization ultimately helps the discourse to achieve ideological manipulation and enhance their own legitimacy. By doing this, Trump's discourse develops a sense of crisis and urgency among the IDC. Also, through assigning his opponent the image of external threat which would court disaster, he manages to prove himself to more suitable for the presidency.

Though this paper still has some limitations, including the accuracy of the statistic for the recognition of lexical-grammatical items is relatively subjective and the limited explanation, it manages to show the distinctive explanatory power of the proximization theory and may provide some implications for the future research. Hopefully it can help to draw more scholarly attention into the study of the theory as well as the cognitive approach to the critical discourse analysis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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