

LEGITIMIZING THE ILLEGITIMATE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE AND POWER IN "OPERATION ABSOLUTE RESOLVE"

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Abstract

On January 3, 2026, the United States conducted "Operation Absolute Resolve," a military intervention in Venezuela resulting in President Nicolás Maduro's capture and approximately 80 deaths. While international law experts condemned this as unlawful aggression, the U.S. administration framed it as legitimate "law enforcement." This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how linguistic strategies legitimize actions violating international law. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, this qualitative research analyzes official statements from Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, and Department of Justice documents. Findings reveal that through strategic naming, systematic euphemism, and enemy construction, the U.S. government transforms military invasion into routine policing discourse. The analysis identifies six primary legitimization strategies: strategic naming ("Absolute Resolve"), euphemistic framing ("law enforcement operation"), criminalization ("narco-terrorist"), constitutional authorization, moral evaluation, and historical mythopoesis. This study concludes that hegemonic powers weaponize language to override international law, setting dangerous precedents for global sovereignty. The research contributes to understanding how discourse manufactures consent for illegal state violence.

Keywords : Critical Discourse Analysis; Political Legitimation; Euphemism; Hegemony; International Law

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

The relationship between language and power has never been more critical in international relations than in the contemporary era of information dominance. When powerful states conduct military interventions, they must not only deploy physical force but also

discursive strategies to legitimize their actions to domestic and international audiences. The case of "Operation Absolute Resolve" the January 3, 2026 U.S. military operation that captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro presents a striking example of this phenomenon. The operation resulted in approximately 80 deaths in Caracas and immediate international condemnation, yet the U.S. administration successfully maintained its narrative of legitimate "law enforcement" within domestic discourse.

The discursive contrast was stark: while the UN Human Rights Office warned that this unilateral action made the world "a less safe place" by eroding state sovereignty norms (Reuters, 2026), the White House celebrated it as a "triumph for the rule of law" (AP News, 2020). This paradox where an act condemned as illegal aggression by international law experts is simultaneously presented as legitimate legal procedure reveals the critical role of language in contemporary power politics.

1.2 Problem Statement

International law, particularly the UN Charter Article 2(4), explicitly prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity of states. UN Special Rapporteur Ben Saul characterized Operation Absolute Resolve as "unlawful U.S. aggression," while international legal scholars described it as a "grave breach of fundamental principles of international law." Yet despite this unanimous legal condemnation, the Trump administration maintained its framing of the operation as "law enforcement" with considerable domestic success.

This raises fundamental questions about the relationship between discourse and power in international relations. How do powerful states use language to legitimize actions that violate established legal norms? What linguistic mechanisms enable the transformation of military aggression into apparently legitimate policing? How does discourse function to manufacture consent for actions that would otherwise be universally condemned?

1.3 Research Gap and Significance

While Critical Discourse Analysis has been extensively applied to analyze military interventions including the Iraq War (Graham et al., 2004), the War on Terror (Jackson, 2005), and various U.S. operations in Latin America Operation Absolute Resolve represents a new frontier. This is the first acknowledged military operation explicitly designed to capture a sitting

head of state while being publicly framed as "law enforcement" despite international condemnation. No existing CDA study examines this specific case or the particular legitimization strategies it employs.

This research is significant for three reasons. First, it reveals how hegemonic powers employ linguistic strategies to circumvent international law, demonstrating that discursive power rivals military power in contemporary international relations. Second, it exposes the dangerous precedent set when language successfully overrides legal reality as U.S. Representative Jim Himes warned, this teaches other powers that linguistic framing alone can justify invasion. Third, it contributes to public critical literacy by revealing how official language obscures rather than reveals truth.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Identify the specific linguistic strategies employed by the Trump administration to legitimize Operation Absolute Resolve
2. Analyze how these strategies function to transform illegal military intervention into apparently legitimate law enforcement
3. Examine the ideological foundations underlying the discourse
4. Assess the implications for international sovereignty and legal norms

1.5 Research Questions

This research is guided by five questions:

1. What specific linguistic strategies does the Trump administration employ to legitimize Operation Absolute Resolve in the face of international legal condemnation?
2. How does euphemistic framing—particularly "law enforcement operation"—function to obscure the illegal nature of military intervention?
3. How is the discursive construction of Maduro as "narco-terrorist" strategically deployed to override his legal status as head of state?
4. What role do authorization strategies (constitutional, legal, historical) play in manufacturing legitimacy?
5. What ideologies underpin the discourse, and what are the implications for international sovereignty?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis: Theoretical Foundation

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged in the 1990s as an approach that treats language not merely as communication tool but as social practice that both reflects and constructs power relations. Norman Fairclough (1992, 2003) conceptualizes discourse as dialectically related to other elements of social practice, arguing that discourse does not simply represent the world but signifies and constructs it. For Fairclough, CDA must analyze the relationship between text, discursive practice, and social practice to reveal how language serves power.

Teun van Dijk (2008) defines CDA as "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (p. 85). Crucially, van Dijk argues that CDA is not neutral analysis but politically committed scholarship that explicitly takes the side of dominated groups. This political commitment distinguishes CDA from purely descriptive linguistic analysis.

Wodak and Meyer (2009) emphasize that CDA's central task is to denaturalize dominant discourses that have become "common sense," revealing the power relations hidden beneath apparently neutral language. They argue that linguistic choices are never innocent but always ideologically invested, serving particular interests while appearing universal.

2.2 Power, Ideology, and Hegemony

Three concepts are central to understanding how discourse serves power:

1. **Power in Discourse:** Drawing on Michel Foucault (1980), CDA scholars recognize that power operates not only repressively but productively through discourse. Foucault's concept of "regimes of truth" explains how certain statements come to be accepted as true not because they are factually accurate but because power designates them as such. In Operation Absolute Resolve, the U.S. exercises power by creating a "regime of truth" where military invasion can be truthfully called "law enforcement."
2. **Ideology:** Van Dijk (1998) defines ideology as "the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group" (p. 8). Ideologies are cognitive frameworks that organize group beliefs and values, often serving to legitimize power asymmetries. The ideology of

American exceptionalism the belief that the U.S. operates by different rules due to unique moral character pervades Operation Absolute Resolve discourse, enabling acceptance of actions that would be condemned if committed by other states.

3. **Hegemony:** Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, adopted by Fairclough (1992), describes domination achieved through consent rather than force. Hegemonic power works by making particular interests appear as universal common sense. When the U.S. successfully frames invasion as "law enforcement," it achieves hegemony making aggression appear as justice through discursive means.

2.3 Legitimation Strategies

Theo van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) framework of legitimation strategies provides analytical tools for understanding how actors justify their actions in discourse. Van Leeuwen identifies four primary modes:

1. **Authorization:** Legitimation by reference to authority personal (experts, leaders) or impersonal (law, tradition, custom). In political discourse, authorization often invokes legal frameworks, constitutional powers, or historical precedents to justify actions.
2. **Rationalization:** Legitimation through providing reasons, typically instrumental (means-ends logic) or theoretical (appeals to natural order). Political actors rationalize interventions by framing them as necessary means to desirable ends (e.g., security, justice).
3. **Moral Evaluation:** Legitimation through value judgments and moral frameworks. This strategy constructs binary moral universes where certain actions become not just permissible but morally obligatory.
4. **Mythopoesis:** Legitimation through storytelling and historical narratives. Political discourse often invokes historical precedents or national myths to naturalize present actions as continuation of tradition.

Van Leeuwen's framework is particularly valuable because it reveals how multiple legitimation strategies operate simultaneously, creating layered justifications that are more resistant to challenge than any single strategy.

2.4 Euphemism in Political and Military Discourse

Political euphemism has been extensively studied as a key mechanism for obscuring violence and manufacturing consent. Lutz (1987) documented how military and political language systematically softens harsh realities: "collateral damage" for civilian casualties, "enhanced interrogation" for torture, "neutralize" for kill. Allan and Burrige (2006) demonstrate that euphemism serves not merely to make language polite but to fundamentally reconstruct reality in ways that serve power interests.

Chilton (2004) analyzes how political discourse uses euphemism alongside other strategies metaphor, deixis, presupposition to construct threats and justify military responses. His analysis of "security discourse" reveals how political choices are transformed into apparent necessities through linguistic means. Similarly, Jackson (2005) shows how War on Terrorism discourse employed euphemism to sanitize violence and legitimize policies that would otherwise be unacceptable.

The discourse surrounding Operation Absolute Resolve follows this pattern, with "law enforcement operation" serving as master euphemism that disguises military invasion as routine policing.

2.5 Previous Studies on Military Intervention Discourse

CDA has been productively applied to analyze various U.S. military interventions. Graham, Keenan, and Dowd (2004) analyzed George W. Bush's "War on Terror" discourse, revealing how apocalyptic framing and moral binaries legitimized the Iraq invasion. Their findings on enemy construction ("axis of evil") and euphemism ("liberation") parallel strategies observed in Operation Absolute Resolve.

Dunmire (2011) examined how political leaders "project futures" through discourse, creating scenarios that make intervention seem inevitable. Hodges (2011) demonstrated how War on Terror discourse created a "permanent state of exception" where normal legal constraints could be suspended.

Regarding U.S.-Latin America relations specifically, Lazar and Lazar (2004) analyze how U.S. discourse employs "out-casting" rhetorical exclusion of certain actors from the community of legitimate nations. Venezuela under Maduro has been systematically out-casted through terms like "narco-state" and "criminal regime."

However, no existing study examines Operation Absolute Resolve, making this research a timely contribution to understanding how legitimization strategies evolve to justify increasingly bold violations of international norms.

2.6 Positioning This Research

This study builds on existing CDA scholarship while addressing a novel case. It applies Fairclough's three-dimensional framework to analyze how discourse operates at textual, discursive practice, and social practice levels. It employs van Leeuwen's legitimization strategies to identify specific justification mechanisms. It draws on euphemism literature to understand how "law enforcement operation" obscures military aggression. And it situates the analysis within broader patterns of U.S. intervention discourse in Latin America.

The contribution lies not just in applying established frameworks to a new case but in revealing how a superpower attempts to override unanimous international legal condemnation through purely discursive means a phenomenon that challenges assumptions about the relationship between law and power in international relations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis as both theoretical framework and analytical method. CDA is appropriate for this research because it explicitly examines how language serves power, making it ideal for analyzing political discourse that legitimizes controversial state actions. The research is interpretive in paradigm, recognizing that discourse analysis involves interpretation of meaning rather than measurement of variables.

3.2 Data Source and Collection

The primary data consists of official statements and documents from the Trump administration regarding Operation Absolute Resolve:

1. Official Statements:

- Donald Trump's public statements on Operation Absolute Resolve (January 3-10, 2026)
- Secretary of State Marco Rubio's press briefings and interviews (January 3-10, 2026)
- White House press releases regarding the operation

2. Legal Documents:

- U.S. Department of Justice indictment of Nicolás Maduro (March 26, 2020)
- DOJ statements characterizing the operation

3. Media Coverage:

- Transcripts of official interviews with Trump and Rubio
- Press conference statements

Data was collected through:

- Official government websites (whitehouse.gov, state.gov, justice.gov)
- Reputable news sources reporting direct quotes (Reuters, AP News, The Guardian)
- Transcripts of televised interviews

The data collection focused on the initial 7-day period (January 3-10, 2026) when primary framing occurred, as well as the March 26, 2020 DOJ indictment that laid discursive groundwork.

3.3 Data Analysis Framework: Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

This study applies Norman Fairclough's (1992, 2003) three-dimensional framework, which analyzes discourse at three interconnected levels:

Level 1: Textual Analysis (Micro) At this level, analysis focuses on linguistic features:

- Lexical choices: Specific words used (e.g., "operation," "law enforcement," "narco-terrorist")
- Grammar: Active vs. passive voice, nominalization
- Modality: Expressions of certainty, obligation, possibility (e.g., "absolute," "must")
- Metaphor: Conceptual metaphors structuring understanding
- Presupposition: What is assumed rather than stated

Level 2: Discursive Practice Analysis (Meso) This level examines how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed:

- Production: Who produces the discourse? Under what institutional constraints?
- Distribution: How is discourse spread? Through what media channels?
- Consumption: Who is the intended audience? How might they interpret it?

- Intertextuality: How does discourse reference other texts (laws, precedents, historical documents)?

Level 3: Social Practice Analysis (Macro) This level connects discourse to broader social structures:

- Power relations: How does discourse serve or challenge power?
- Ideologies: What belief systems underpin the discourse?
- Hegemony: How does discourse contribute to dominance through consent?
- Social context: Historical, political, institutional contexts shaping discourse

3.4 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded systematically:

Step 1: Data Familiarization

- Read all texts multiple times to identify themes and patterns
- Note initial observations about linguistic strategies

Step 2: Textual Coding

- Code lexical choices (euphemisms, dysphemisms, loaded terms)
- Code grammatical features (active/passive, nominalization)
- Code modality markers (high/low certainty)
- Identify metaphors and presuppositions

Step 3: Legitimation Strategy Identification Using van Leeuwen's (2007) framework, identify instances of:

- Authorization (personal and impersonal)
- Rationalization (instrumental and theoretical)
- Moral evaluation
- Mythopoesis

Step 4: Ideological Square Analysis Apply van Dijk's (2008) ideological square:

- Positive self-presentation (emphasizing U.S. virtue)
- Negative other-presentation (emphasizing Maduro's criminality)
- De-emphasizing negative self-representation (minimizing violence)
- De-emphasizing positive other-representation (ignoring Maduro's sovereign status)

Step 5: Integration Connect micro-level linguistic features to meso-level discursive practices and macro-level social structures to reveal how language serves hegemonic power.

3.5 Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure analytical rigor:

1. **Transparency:** All analytical steps are documented, and key data excerpts are provided in the findings section, allowing readers to assess interpretations.
2. **Theoretical Grounding:** Analysis is consistently grounded in established CDA frameworks (Fairclough, van Dijk, van Leeuwen) rather than ad hoc interpretation.
3. **Contextualization:** Discourse is analyzed within its historical, political, and legal context to avoid decontextualized readings.
4. **Reflexivity:** As CDA is inherently political, I acknowledge my critical stance toward abuse of power while maintaining analytical rigor in applying theoretical frameworks.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Strategic Naming: "Operation Absolute Resolve"

The operation's official name performs crucial legitimization work before any justification is offered. Each component deserves careful analysis:

1. "Operation"

This term immediately frames the action within military-institutional discourse. It suggests:

- Professional planning and execution (not spontaneous violence)
- Institutional authorization (following military protocols)
- Temporal boundedness (clear beginning and end)
- Precedent (following naming conventions of Operations Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom)

The word "operation" carries connotations of surgical precision and professional competence, distancing the action from concepts like "invasion," "attack," or "aggression."

2. "Absolute"

This adjective performs critical discursive work by:

- Foreclosing debate: If resolve is "absolute," it cannot be partial, conditional, or negotiable

- Asserting moral certainty: "Absolute" suggests complete, total rightness
- Employing high modality: Maximum epistemic certainty characteristic of powerful actors
- Naturalizing action: What is "absolute" appears inevitable, not chosen

The choice of "absolute" rather than alternatives like "strong," "firm," or "decisive" is significant. "Strong resolve" suggests determination but allows for degrees. "Absolute resolve" eliminates gradation, presenting the action as categorically necessary.

3. "Resolve"

This noun carries dual semantic meaning:

- As determination: Suggests courage, steadfastness, strength of character
- As solution: To "resolve" means to solve, to bring closure to a problem
- Agentic framing: U.S. as decisive problem-solver, not aggressor

The dual meaning is strategically valuable. When Trump speaks of "absolute resolve," listeners can interpret it both as "we have unwavering determination" and "we are absolutely solving this problem."

4. Legitimation Function

Applying van Leeuwen's (2007) framework, the name itself performs legitimation through:

Moral Evaluation: The name presupposes moral certainty. If the resolve is "absolute," the underlying cause must be just.

Impersonal Authorization: An official "Operation" name confers institutional legitimacy, suggesting proper authorization from military-legal apparatus.

Rationalization: "Resolve" frames the action as solution to a problem, implying instrumental rationality (problem exists → we resolve it).

5. What Was NOT Named

The absent alternatives reveal ideological choices. The operation was NOT named:

- "Operation Caracas Strike" (too aggressive, too geographically specific)
- "Operation Maduro Capture" (too focused on individual, like assassination)
- "Operation Democracy Restoration" (too explicitly ideological)
- "Operation Just Cause 2.0" (too explicit about Panama precedent)

"Absolute Resolve" achieves perfect balance: strong without seeming violent, certain without seeming arrogant, decisive without revealing the decision is to invade a sovereign nation.

4.2 Euphemistic Framing: "Law Enforcement Operation"

Secretary of State Marco Rubio's characterization represents the master euphemism of Operation Absolute Resolve discourse. In interviews, Rubio consistently stated:

"At its core, this is an arrest of two fugitives indicted by American justice, and the Department of Defense supported the Department of Justice in that task. This was a law enforcement operation with military support, not war against Venezuela." This statement requires detailed deconstruction:

Phrase 1: "At its core, this is an arrest"

- "At its core": Presupposes complexity exists, but claims to reveal simple essence
- "arrest": Euphemism for "military seizure of foreign head of state"
- Alternatives not used: "capture," "abduction," "detention," "seizure"
- "arrest" implies:
 - Legal authority to detain
 - Following judicial procedures
 - Legitimate jurisdiction
 - Target is criminal, not political leader

Compare with accurate descriptors:

- International law: "abduction," "kidnapping," "unlawful detention"
- Military terminology: "capture," "seizure," "extraction"
- Political terminology: "removal," "overthrow," "regime change"

Phrase 2: "two fugitives indicted by American justice"

- "fugitives": Criminalizes, strips official status
 - NOT "President Maduro and First Lady Flores"
 - Presupposes guilt (why else would they flee?)
- "indicted by American justice":
 - Impersonal authorization through abstract "justice"
 - Hides that indictment was U.S. political choice
 - Presupposes U.S. jurisdiction over Venezuelan president

Phrase 3: "Department of Defense supported the Department of Justice"

- Bureaucratic language creates impression of routine inter-agency cooperation
- "supported": Minimizes military's central role
 - NOT "invaded to enable"
 - NOT "provided military force for"
 - Suggests secondary, auxiliary function
- Reality inversion: Massive military operation presented as "support" for legal process
- Actual sequence: Military invasion enabled by legal framing, not legal process requiring military support

Phrase 4: "law enforcement operation with military support"

This is the master euphemism. Consider what it disguises:

Reality:

- Airstrikes on foreign capital
- Approximately 80 deaths
- Invasion of sovereign territory
- No Venezuelan government consent
- No UN Security Council authorization
- Condemned by international law experts

Euphemistic Framing:

- "law enforcement" = routine policing
- "with military support" = incidental military involvement
- No mention of deaths, sovereignty violation, illegality

The Domestication Strategy

This euphemism performs "discursive domestication"—transformation of international aggression into domestic law enforcement terminology. This serves three functions:

Jurisdictional Shift: From: International law jurisdiction (where U.S. lacks authority) To: U.S. domestic law jurisdiction (where U.S. claims authority)

Normalization: Americans understand domestic arrests (police arrest criminals, courts try them, justice prevails). By using familiar domestic terminology, discourse makes foreign military intervention seem as normal as local police work.

Moral Cleansing: "Law enforcement" carries positive connotations:

- Maintaining order
- Protecting communities
- Bringing criminals to justice
- NOT: aggression, invasion, violation

Van Dijk's Ideological Square

This statement exemplifies all four components:

Strategy	Manifestation
Emphasize OUR good	"bringing criminals to justice," "American justice," "law enforcement"
De-emphasize OUR bad	No mention of: 80 deaths, sovereignty violation, international law violation
Emphasize THEIR bad	"fugitives," "indicted," "narco-terrorists"
De-emphasize THEIR good	No mention of: Maduro as elected president, Venezuela's sovereignty, diplomatic immunity

4.3 Enemy Construction: "Narco-Terrorist"

The transformation of Nicolás Maduro from "President of Venezuela" to "narco-terrorist" represents systematic enemy construction that removes legal protections and justifies extraordinary measures.

Deconstructing the Compound Label

"Narco-" (from narcotics):

- Criminalizes: Associates with drug trafficking, organized crime
- Threatens: Drugs = danger to American families, youth
- Delegitimizes: Drug dealers cannot be legitimate leaders
- War on Drugs legacy: Taps decades of anti-drug discourse

"Terrorist":

- Securitizes: Invokes post-9/11 security framework
- Existentializes: Terrorism = attack on civilization itself
- Dehumanizes: Terrorists are enemies beyond negotiation
- War on Terror precedent: Justifies extreme measures

"Narco-Terrorist" (compound):

- Double criminalization: BOTH drug dealer AND terrorist
- Amplified threat: Fusion of two threat categories
- Maximum delegitimation: Removes ANY legitimate status
- Legal black hole: Neither criminal NOR combatant protections apply

Discursive Functions

Function 1: Removing Legal Protections

International law provides heads of state with immunity. But this immunity attaches to HEADS OF STATE, not to "narco-terrorists." The label creates a linguistic loophole:

Legal Reality:

Nicolás Maduro = President of Venezuela

- Head of state immunity applies
- Cannot be arrested by foreign powers
- Diplomatic relations required

Discursive Transformation:

Nicolás Maduro = "Narco-Terrorist"

- Criminal, not head of state
- No immunity applies
- Subject to arrest like any criminal

Function 2: Van Dijk's "Us vs. Them"

US (America):

- Defenders of law and order
- Protectors of families from drugs
- Fighters against terrorism
- Moral actors bringing criminals to justice

THEM (Maduro):

- Criminals poisoning American communities
- Terrorists threatening American security
- Illegitimate actors unworthy of sovereignty protections
- Evil requiring elimination

This binary eliminates nuance. Maduro cannot simultaneously be "narco-terrorist" AND legitimate president with sovereignty rights. The label forecloses this possibility.

Function 3: Justifying Extraordinary Measures

Once labeled "narco-terrorist," Maduro enters a zone where normal rules don't apply:

- Diplomatic negotiation? NO → You don't negotiate with terrorists
- Respect sovereignty? NO → Sovereignty doesn't protect narco-states
- Follow international law? NO → Extraordinary threats require extraordinary measures
- Concern for casualties? NO → Collateral damage acceptable in fighting narco-terrorism

Historical Precedent: Manuel Noriega

This strategy has clear precedent. In 1989, the U.S. invaded Panama in "Operation Just Cause," capturing President Manuel Noriega:

Operation Just Cause (1989)	Operation Absolute Resolve (2026)
Target: Manuel Noriega	Target: Nicolás Maduro
Label: "Narco-dictator"	Label: "Narco-terrorist"
Justification: Drug indictment	Justification: Narco-terrorism indictment
Framing: Law enforcement	Framing: Law enforcement
Reality: Military invasion	Reality: Military invasion
Deaths: 500-3000	Deaths: ~80
International response: Condemned	International response: Condemned

The pattern reveals a discursive template for U.S. intervention in Latin America:

1. Indict leader on drug charges
2. Label with "narco-" prefix
3. Frame military invasion as "law enforcement"
4. Claim moral high ground

The Non-Recognition Circular Logic

The label enables circular reasoning:

Step 1: U.S. doesn't recognize Maduro as legitimate president



Step 2: If not legitimate president, he's just a criminal



Step 3: We indicted him for narco-terrorism



Step 4: Therefore he's "narco-terrorist," not president



Step 5: Therefore no head-of-state immunity



Step 6: Therefore we can "arrest" him



Step 7: Therefore military operation is "law enforcement"

Each step depends on the previous, but the chain starts with a political choice (non-recognition) naturalized through language.

Material Consequences: The 80 Deaths

The "narco-terrorist" label has material consequences. By dehumanizing Maduro, it dehumanizes those associated with him, making the 80 deaths seem like "acceptable losses" in fighting narco-terrorism rather than victims of illegal aggression.

This represents what Lakoff (2004) calls "moral framing" once someone is framed as pure evil, violence against them becomes morally permissible, even virtuous.

4.4 Authorization Strategies

The Trump administration employs multiple authorization strategies, creating layered legitimization resistant to single-point challenge.

Constitutional Authorization

Trump administration claims:

"The President has inherent constitutional authority as Commander-in-Chief to conduct this operation."

Analysis:

- "Commander-in-Chief": Invokes Constitutional role (Article II)
- "inherent authority": Suggests natural, inalienable power
- "constitutional": Claims grounding in highest legal authority

However:

- Constitution gives war powers to CONGRESS (Article I, Section 8)
- No Congressional authorization for this operation
- Rep. Jim Himes: "Clearly not legal under the Constitution"

Discursive Function:

- Impersonal authorization (van Leeuwen): NOT "I decided" but "Constitution permits"
- Shifts agency from person to institution
- Makes action appear:
 - Objective (not subjective choice)
 - Legal (grounded in Constitution)
 - Inevitable (authority must be exercised)

Legal Authorization: DOJ Indictment

Claim: "We are executing arrest warrants issued by the Department of Justice."

Analysis:

- DOJ indictment (March 26, 2020) charges Maduro with narco-terrorism
- Framed as judicial process requiring execution
- "Arrest warrant" suggests legal document with judicial oversight

Problems:

- DOJ is executive branch, not independent judiciary
- U.S. courts lack jurisdiction over Venezuelan president
- International law doesn't permit one nation to "enforce" domestic warrants on another's sovereign territory through military force

Discursive Function:

- Bureaucratic legitimation: DOJ = professional, legal institution
- Presupposes jurisdictional authority

- Temporal manipulation: 6-year gap between indictment and operation presented as legal continuity

Historical Authorization: Precedent

Claim:

"This operation follows precedent set by Operation Just Cause and other interventions."

Analysis:

- References 1989 Panama invasion (Noriega capture)
- Invokes "tradition" of U.S. intervention in hemisphere
- Appeals to historical authority

Problems:

- Operation Just Cause was also condemned (UN General Assembly voted 75-20 to condemn)
- Selective historization: Mentions precedent EXISTS, omits it was CONDEMNED
- International law has evolved since 1945; past precedents don't justify present violations

Discursive Function:

- Mythopoesis (van Leeuwen): Legitimation through historical narrative
- Traditional authority: "We've always done this"
- Naturalizes intervention as normal U.S. practice

Monroe Doctrine Invocation

Trump referenced the "Donroe Doctrine" [sicmispronounced]:

Analysis:

- Monroe Doctrine (1823): Keep European powers out of Western Hemisphere
- Trump's use: Justify U.S. going INTO Latin American nation
- Ironical inversion: Doctrine meant to protect sovereignty, used to violate it

Discursive Function:

- Historical legitimation: Connects to 200-year tradition
- Paternalistic framing: U.S. as hemisphere's natural guardian
- American exceptionalism: Naturalizes U.S. hegemony over Latin America

Layered Authorization

The administration doesn't rely on single authorization but creates comprehensive apparatus:

Layer 1: Constitutional (Commander-in-Chief)

Layer 2: Legal (DOJ indictment)

Layer 3: Institutional (DOD + DOJ cooperation)

Layer 4: Historical (Monroe Doctrine, Just Cause)

Layer 5: Moral (fighting narco-terrorism)

Each layer reinforces others. Even if one is challenged, others remain. This is "legitimation through accumulation" (Reyes, 2011).

4.5 Moral Evaluation and Mythopoesis

Moral Evaluation

Trump's March 26, 2020 statement announcing the indictment employed explicit moral framing:

"We must bring these criminals to justice to protect our people... They are poisoning American communities and destroying the future of our children."

Analysis:

- "must": Deontic modality moral obligation, not choice
- "criminals": Moral categorization, removes political status
- "protect our people": Paternalistic duty
- "poisoning": Medical/biological metaphor toxic, contaminating
- "destroying the future": Apocalyptic stakes children's lives at risk

Discursive Function:

- Binary moral universe: Protectors (U.S.) vs. Destroyers (Maduro)
- Paternalistic obligation: U.S. MUST act to protect innocents
- Existential stakes: Not just policy choice but matter of survival
- Moral evaluation as justification: If Maduro "destroys futures," extreme measures become justified

This represents van Leeuwen's (2007) moral evaluation strategy legitimization through value judgments that make actions appear not just permissible but morally necessary.

Historical Mythopoesis

The Monroe Doctrine invocation represents mythopoesis legitimization through historical narrative. Trump's reference (despite mispronunciation) attempts to:

- Connect present to past: Operation as continuation of American tradition
- Naturalize hegemony: U.S. as hemisphere's historical guardian
- Invoke manifest destiny: U.S. role in Americas as natural, inevitable
- Paternalistic framing: Latin America needs U.S. protection/guidance

The discourse evokes what Grandin (2006) terms "Empire's Workshop" the long history of U.S. interventionism in Latin America justified through recurring narratives of protection, stability, and American exceptionalism.

4.6 High Modality and Certainty

Throughout the discourse, high modality language asserts absolute certainty:

Examples:

- "ABSOLUTE resolve" (not "strong" or "firm")
- "MUST bring to justice" (not "should" or "could")
- "WILL protect our people" (not "may" or "hope to")
- "IS law enforcement" (not "can be seen as")

Function:

- Epistemic authority: Claims truth regardless of contrary evidence
- Forecloses debate: Categorical assertions leave no room for challenge
- Power assertion: High modality characteristic of powerful actors
- Reality constitution: Doesn't describe but DECLARES reality

As Fairclough (2003) notes, those with power can speak categorically; those without must hedge. U.S. discourse uses maximum modality because it possesses the power to assert "truth" and make it prevail domestically despite international contradiction.

DISCUSSION

5.1 Synergistic Operation of Legitimation Strategies

The analysis reveals that legitimation strategies do not operate in isolation but work synergistically to create comprehensive discursive shield. The Trump administration deploys:

1. **Strategic naming** ("Absolute Resolve") → creates moral certainty
2. **Euphemistic framing** ("law enforcement") → disguises aggression
3. **Enemy construction** ("narco-terrorist") → removes protections
4. **Authorization** (constitutional, legal, historical) → claims legitimacy
5. **Moral evaluation** (protecting children) → establishes duty
6. **High modality** (absolute certainty) → forecloses debate

Each strategy reinforces others:

- Euphemism ("law enforcement") requires enemy construction ("can't arrest unless target is criminal")
- Enemy construction enables authorization ("executing warrant against fugitive")
- Authorization supports moral evaluation ("legal duty to protect")
- All wrapped in high modality language ("absolute," "must")

This layered approach makes challenge difficult. When one justification is contested (international law), others remain (constitutional authority, moral duty, precedent). The cumulative effect creates impression of overwhelming legitimacy even when individual justifications are weak.

5.2 Discourse Overriding Law: Hegemony in Action

The most significant finding is that discursive reality successfully displaces legal reality at least domestically. Despite unanimous international legal condemnation, the U.S. government maintained its "law enforcement" framing with considerable success in domestic discourse.

This represents Gramscian hegemony: dominance achieved through consent rather than force. The U.S. doesn't merely impose its narrative but achieves acceptance through sophisticated linguistic strategies. As Fairclough (1992) argues, hegemony is never total or permanent but must be constantly maintained through discursive work—precisely what Operation Absolute Resolve discourse accomplishes.

The Power Dynamics:

Foucault's (1980) concept of "regimes of truth" explains this phenomenon. The U.S. exercises power by creating a regime where military invasion can be truthfully called "law enforcement" within domestic discourse. Truth here is not correspondence to reality but effect of power the ability to make certain statements count as true regardless of factual or legal status.

This reveals that in contemporary international relations, **discursive power rivals military power**. The Trump administration's ability to maintain its narrative domestically despite international condemnation demonstrates that hegemony operates as much through language as through force.

5.3 Material Consequences: The 80 Deaths

The **80 deaths in Caracas** serve as stark reminder that discourse has material consequences. In analyzed U.S. statements, these deaths are systematically erased not mentioned, not acknowledged, not mourned.

This erasure is strategic. When violence is framed as "law enforcement," deaths become "regrettable but necessary consequences" of arresting "dangerous criminals." When targets are labeled "narco-terrorists," their deaths (and bystanders') are implicitly justified as eliminating threats.

Butler (2009) terms this "frames of war" discourse determines which lives are "grievable" and which are not. The 80 Venezuelans who died are rendered ungrievable in U.S. discourse because they fall outside the frame of legitimate victims. They become what Agamben (1998) calls "bare life" life that can be killed without murder being committed.

As Chilton (2004) observes, political discourse doesn't merely describe violence it enables it by making it seem necessary, justified, or invisible. The euphemisms analyzed here perform precisely this function: they don't just soften harsh realities; they reconstruct reality to make violence acceptable.

5.4 Dangerous Precedents: Template for Future Aggression

Perhaps the most alarming implication is the precedent established. As Rep. Jim Himes warned:

"Russia and China just learned that all you need to do if you want to go into Estonia is say that the leader of Estonia is a bad guy."

The legitimization strategies identified are transferable, creating a template:

Step 1: Criminalize target leader

Step 2: Refuse recognition as legitimate

Step 3: Issue domestic indictment/warrant

Step 4: Frame military intervention as law enforcement

Step 5: Use high modality to foreclose debate **Step 6:** Invoke historical precedent

This template could be applied to any powerful state targeting weaker neighbors:

- Russia → Ukraine (partially employed in "denazification" discourse)
- China → Taiwan (could frame as "domestic law enforcement" against "separatists")
- Any hegemon → weaker state (criminalize leader, claim law enforcement)

5.5 American Exceptionalism as Underlying Ideology

All analyzed strategies rest on a coherent ideological foundation: **American exceptionalism** the belief that the U.S. operates by different rules due to unique moral character and historical mission.

This ideology manifests as:

Legal Exceptionalism:

- U.S. can indict foreign heads of state (others cannot)
- U.S. can execute indictments militarily (others cannot)
- International law applies to others, not to America

Moral Exceptionalism:

- U.S. actions are inherently virtuous (fighting drugs, terrorism)
- Similar actions by others are aggression (Russia in Ukraine)
- U.S. has right/duty to intervene for "hemispheric stability"

Discursive Exceptionalism:

- U.S. has power to redefine terms (aggression → law enforcement)
- U.S. discourse becomes global baseline (media adopt framing)

- Counter-discourses marginalized as "propaganda"

Van Dijk (1998) defines ideology as "the basis of social representations of groups." American exceptionalism is the cognitive schema enabling U.S. policymakers and public to accept actions that, if committed by other powers, would be immediately condemned as aggression.

5.6 Implications for International Sovereignty

Operation Absolute Resolve discourse threatens fundamental principles of international order. The UN Charter Article 2(4) prohibits use of force against territorial integrity of states a principle Hathaway and Shapiro (2017) show represented revolutionary shift from world where conquest was legitimate to one where aggression is illegal.

If powerful states can circumvent Article 2(4) through linguistic framing calling invasion "law enforcement" the principle becomes meaningless. Sovereignty transforms from legal right into privilege granted only to states powerful enough to resist or friendly enough to avoid targeting.

Fairclough (2001) argues discourse doesn't just reflect social change but constitutes it. Operation Absolute Resolve discourse attempts to reconstitute international order from one based on sovereign equality to one based on hegemonic prerogative.

5.7 Critical Discourse Analysis as Resistance

This case demonstrates why CDA must remain explicitly critical and political. As van Dijk (2008) argues, CDA scholars cannot remain neutral when analyzing discourse serving domination.

CDA's role is to **denaturalize** what discourse **naturalizes** to reveal that:

- "Law enforcement operation" is political choice, not objective description
- "Narco-terrorist" is strategic label, not neutral fact
- "Absolute resolve" is rhetorical assertion, not moral truth

By exposing these linguistic mechanisms, CDA performs crucial democratic function: helping publics recognize manipulation, understand how official language can obscure rather than reveal, and see how power operates through discourse.

CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Findings

This study concludes that the Trump administration employed a highly structured set of linguistic strategies to legitimize Operation Absolute Resolve, a military intervention that was near-unanimously condemned by international law experts as an act of unlawful aggression. Through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis within Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the research identified several interconnected legitimization mechanisms that functioned systematically to reconstruct reality. The strategic naming of "Operation Absolute Resolve" successfully established a sense of moral and epistemic certainty that foreclosed diplomatic debate before any formal justification was even offered. Simultaneously, the systematic use of euphemism through the term "law enforcement operation" performed a "discursive domestication" of international aggression, skillfully shifting the discourse from an international legal framework to a U.S. domestic law framework. This was further reinforced by the strategic construction of President Maduro as a "narco-terrorist," a label that functioned to strip him of his sovereign status and legal protections, thereby creating a linguistic loophole that rendered head-of-state immunity void within U.S. political discourse. Furthermore, the deployment of layered authorization strategies, ranging from claims of inherent constitutional authority to historical precedents such as the Monroe Doctrine, created an accumulation of legitimacy that was resistant to single-point challenges. These strategies operated synergistically, using moral evaluation and high-modality language to assert an absolute certainty that transformed illegal state violence into an apparently virtuous duty to protect American communities.

Theoretically, this study provides a significant contribution by demonstrating how legitimization strategies function to justify actions explicitly prohibited by international law, revealing the profound gap between legal reality and discursive representation. Empirically, it offers the first detailed CDA analysis of Operation Absolute Resolve, a new frontier in intervention discourse where the military capture of a sitting head of state is framed as routine policing despite global condemnation. Practically, this analysis equips readers with critical literacy tools to recognize linguistic manipulation in political discourse and identify patterns where official language is used to obscure truth. While providing deep insights, this study is

limited by its focus on English-language official statements immediately following the operation in January 2026, and therefore does not account for long-term discourse evolution or the Spanish-language counter-discourses from Venezuela. Future research should explore public reception of these narratives and investigate how international sovereignty is eroded when the language of power is capable of overriding fundamental legal principles through discursive framing alone. Ultimately, this research underscores that the power to control discourse is the power to define reality itself, which poses a severe threat to the international order if military aggression continues to be rebranded as justice through the weaponization of language.

Future Research Directions:

1. Comparative CDA analyzing multiple U.S. interventions to identify patterns and evolution
2. Counter-discourse analysis examining how Venezuela and international community resisted U.S. framing
3. Longitudinal study tracking how discourse evolves and how operation is remembered historically
4. Reception studies examining how American public actually interpreted legitimization strategies
5. Global discourse ecology analysis comparing Russian, Chinese, and Arabic media framing

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