



# A Study on the Legitimization Strategy in War Discourse ——Taking the American Speech in the Iraq War as an Example

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**Abstract:** All kinds of human social activities are inseparable from language, and war is no exception. Compared with other social behaviors, people naturally have a fear and resistance to war, especially the unjust war of aggression. Faced with this situation, politicians skillfully used various discourse legitimization strategies to win public opinion support for the smooth progress of the war. This paper uses Reyes's discourse legitimization strategy framework to analyze the discourse of American officials in the Iraq War, and reveals how the United States beautifies an aggressive war into a just and noble war against terrorism.

**Keywords:** Legitimization Strategy; War Discourse; Iraq War

## Introduction

When people intend to interpret their thoughts or persuade others to believe what they have said, they would adopt some strategies. Similarly, using specific strategies is crucial for politicians who aim to launch a war towards another country. By doing so, the public, in some degree, will be much more easier to understand and in favour of decisions made by primary policy makers. In the following part, this paper will explore the legitimization strategies used by American politicians in the Iraq War through four aspects: Legitimization through Emotions, Legitimization through A Hypothetical Future, Legitimization through Rationality and Legitimization through Altruism.

## Legitimization and Legitimization of War

People began to pay attention to the study of legitimization very early. This tradition can even be traced back to Aristotelian rhetorical analysis and classical sociological research<sup>[6]</sup>. Aristotle pointed out in *The Politics* that legitimization is one of the important functions of language. "As a political animal, human beings imply what is beneficial or harmful, what is fair or unfair through language"<sup>[14]</sup>. Broadly speaking, anything that can answer the question "Why", such as "Why do you do this?" or "Why do you do this in this way?" belongs to the category of legitimization<sup>[15]</sup>.

Moreover, the definition of legitimization is also controversial. Van Dijk<sup>[16]</sup> believed that "legitimization" was "to provide appropriate reasons, grounds or acceptable motives for past or present acts". Reyes<sup>[5]</sup> believes that legitimization refers to the process in which the speaker recognizes or permits a certain social behavior. Berger and Luckmann<sup>[17]</sup> define "Legitimization" in this way: It "provides 'explanations' and justifications for those salient elements of institutional tradition. It 'interprets' institutional order by giving cognitive justification to the meaning that has been objectified and justifies this order by the standard decency of its essential practical activity". This definition shows that the study of legitimization can not be separated from the context, because the essence of legitimization is to give rationality to the specific practical activities of a certain system or order. In a word, legitimization refers to the defense of certain words and deeds, which is a process of argument. It provides arguments for people's social behaviors and ideas.

Legitimization of war refers to the construction of a controversial war as a fair, reasonable and widely supported legal act<sup>[9]</sup>. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) shows that war discourse contains abundant legitimization strategies. For example, in the critical analysis of the Gulf War discourse, Martin Rojo<sup>[2]</sup> summarized the discourse strategies of the media to legalize "our side" and "the other side"; Van Dijk<sup>[9]</sup> studied the legitimization of the Iraq War in political discourse from the textual and cognitive perspectives; Oddo<sup>[3]</sup> discussed the identity construction of "our side" and "the other side" in the US President's speech during the war; Peled Elhanan<sup>[4]</sup> mainly discussed the legitimization of violent conflict in Israeli middle school history textbooks.

## Legitimization Strategy

Van Leeuwen and Wodak<sup>[11]</sup> proposed four kinds of legitimized discourse strategies: Authoritarianism, which is, quoting authoritative figures or traditions; Moral Evaluation, namely the system of quoting values; Rationalization, which refers to the goal and role of institutionalized social behavior; Mythopoesis, which refers to telling the benefits or rewards of legal actions. Several years later, Vaara et al.<sup>[7]</sup> slightly changed the above strategies as follows. In the paper *Pulp and Paper Fiction: On the Discursive legitimization of Global Industrial Restructuring*, Vaara analyzed and distinguished five kinds of legitimization strategies including normalization, authorization, rationalization, moralization and narrativization.<sup>[7]</sup> Vaara<sup>[6]</sup>, referring to Van Leeuwen<sup>[9,14]</sup>, summarized the following legitimized discourse strategies from media discourse: status based authoritarianism, knowledge based authoritarianism, economic rationalization, moral evaluation, mythical future plots and cosmological certainty assertions.



Reyes<sup>[5]</sup> summarized five commonly used legitimizing discourse strategies in political discourse:

- (1) Emotional legitimization, in which politicians often use to arouse other people's emotions, especially fear, to change the audience's view of something, and then legitimize their words and deeds;
- (2) Assuming that the future is legalized, political discourse often envisages a future vision or threat to indicate the necessity of taking immediate measures or actions;
- (3) Rationalization, which is similar to the "Theoretical Rationalization" of Van Leeuwen<sup>[9]</sup>, means that a policy, decision or action is usually characterized as a rational process, aiming to show people that the decision or action is the result of careful consideration;
- (4) Voices of expertise, referring to that the speaker quotes the voice of others in his or her own words to support their standpoints;
- (5) The legitimization of altruism means that some words and deeds are said to be altruistic, especially for the benefit of the poor, the weak, the innocent and other vulnerable groups.

The corpus of this paper is based on the statements made by American government officials and military officers in the Iraq War in more than 300 news reports. And these news reports mainly come from the Guangming Daily, Xinhua Daily Telegraph, People's Daily, Washington Post, New York Times and other official media at home and abroad. In terms of selecting American spokespersons, we primarily selected the President of the United States, the Secretary of State of the United States, the Spokesperson of the State Department and other figures who can represent the official positions of the United States. This paper intends to analyze how the US military used the discourse legitimization strategy to legalize the unjust war of aggression into a noble and just "war against terrorism" in the Iraq War under the theoretical framework of Reyes's political discourse legitimization strategy.

## **Examples of the Application of Legitimization Strategy in Iraq War**

### **Legitimization through Emotions**

The first legitimization strategy is achieved through emotions. As social actors, we evoke different kinds of emotions to legitimize our behaviors or words, and give a behavioral or mental response from our listeners. And we can list some examples, for instance, sympathy, a comforting hug or a simple, understanding nod.

In this section, I will explain legitimization through emotions with examples from what the officer said during the Iraq War. Emotions are often evoked by political speakers to achieve their goals in the political space<sup>[5]</sup>. Perhaps the most emotionally exploited events to legitimize political action in the modern political field (at least in countries such as the USA, the UK and Spain) have been the attacks of 11 September 2001. From that moment on, politicians have legitimized and developed the term 'War on Terror'. September 11 is not only the landmark of this conflict, but also the source of numerous negative emotions related to the tragic events. The events of September 11 have been considered as the events that absolve the USA (leaders and citizens) from all responsibility in starting the 'War on Terror'.

For instance, as for the reason why America tends to launch a war towards Iraq, the American vice president Cheney has expressed his opinion like this: "Those countries that do not support the war on Iraq have not experienced the tragedy of September 11 and cannot understand the position of the United States." Through proposing September 11, which is a great tragedy and familiar event to all of the American people, the political leader skillfully triggers the negative emotions of American people such as sad, fear and hate. Actually, the memory of September 11 has become an extremely crucial component of American's collective memory or shared belief. Thus, taking consideration of those elements, the political leader, on one hand, remind American citizens of horrible nightmares brought by September 11, on the other hand, evoke their hate and antipathy towards the Iraq terrorists. Therefore, in this way, the politicians naturally legitimize their proposal of launching a war towards Iraq.

### **Legitimization through A Hypothetical Future**

The second legitimization strategy the paper would like to introduce is legitimization through a hypothetical future. Specifically speaking, legitimization often appears through a time frame or time line which links our past, present and future. Political leaders regard the present as a period that requires making significant decisions about taking actions. And these actions are usually connected to a cause (which happened in the past) and a consequence (which may occur in the future). That is to say, the cause of our present problem is in the past, and it now triggers emergency action in order to avoid the same problem repeating itself in the future. By doing in this way, we can share a bright and peaceful future. In political discourse, the legitimization process projects the future according to the possible actions taken in the present. In this way, the future displays two patterns displayed in two different ways:

- (1) If we do not do what the speaker suggests in the present, the problem will repeat itself in the future.
- (2) If we do act according to the speaker's proposal, we will enjoy security in our life and a series of familiar values such as freedom, liberty, happiness and so on.

In Iraq War, there is always a clue which goes through the whole process and frequently occurs in American officers' words. That is, the claim that Iraq owns Weapons of Mass Destruction. It is this statement that America utilizes in expressing their motivation of launching the Iraq War. That is to say, just because the Iraq government led by Saddam Hussein owns Weapons of Mass Destruction as well as the Iraq leader has been demonized as the head of terrorists and dictator, America feels the great threat and pressure caused by Iraq. Based on this kind of hypothesis, America made great efforts to persuade their people and audience around the world to believe that the national security and interests of America even their civilian's lives will be great damaged by the Iraq terrorists who owns Weapon of Mass Destruction.

During the Iraq War, we could easily find there are always voices coming from America and their allies claiming the thing that they have found proofs of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. For example, in 11th April, Brooks, the Deputy Commander of US Central Command's War with Iraq Command gave his comment through media that the United States and Britain coalition forces have destroyed the leadership and control capabilities of the Iraqi government and have controlled most of Iraq. And he also acknowledged that despite the coalition forces have not yet found Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, he said, "We believe (Iraq) has Weapons of Mass Destruction and they have the high potential to use those dangerous weapons in the war". By the strategy "Legitimization through A Hypothetical Future", the commander expressed an idea that if America and their allies do not participate the war towards Saddam Hussein and win the war, those terrorists would certainly harm the world peace and cause a great range of destruction to innocent people. So, they have the duty and responsibility to prevent the evils from happening through destroying the political power and military troops led by the dictator Saddam.

What's more, this strategy also contributes to the building of American values typically signified by American democracy. Frankly speaking, the American politicians launch the aggressive war through holding the flag of saving Iraq people from Saddam's brutal and horrible rule and selflessly bring the wonderful, fair, righteous democratic system to Iraq. Thus, they confirm that Iraq in the future will become a country full of freedom, democracy as well as justice. Just like what the US Secretary of State Powell said: "The future leaders of Iraq will be "democratically elected" by the Iraqi people, not appointed by the United States. And the democratic process in Iraq will become a "model" for the Middle East." Obviously, he used both legitimization strategies through envisaging a hypothetical future and altruism in his discourse to beautify the Iraq War launched by them.

### **Legitimization through Rationality**

This legitimization strategy intends to present the action-taking process as a process where decisions have been made after a discussed, evaluated and thoughtful procedure. And the speaker makes his choice as reasonable. Rationality is used here as a social construct within a cultural group, which is something that 'makes sense' for the community and constitutes the 'right' thing to do. In addition, legitimization through rationality often characterizes a certain policy, decision or action as a rational process, and establishes itself as the party that has to react or fight back to defend itself. And here are some examples as following:

The first example happens after the explosion of Palestine Hotel and Qatar's press station made by American troops. Because of the behaviour of American army, several journalists lived in that hotel were injured or killed. And this tragedy made the international society especially organizations such as International Federation of Journalists indignant and incurred massive criticism to American army worked in Iraq. Faced with the pressure of public opinion, the Chief spokesman of the US Department of Defense Clarke stood out to explain: "Firstly, I expressed regret that the US military bombed Palestinian hotels and killed journalists, but the US military only 'instinctively took self-defence measures' after they were shot and rocketed from the direction of the hotel. And the US military was unable to "avoid civilian casualties" in the combat area and 'cannot help and protect journalists'."

From her words, we got the information conveyed by the American army that what they have done to the innocent journalists who just did their work is an accident. They had no choice to fight back because they were attacked at that moment. Although they knew the fact that there are many journalists lived in Palestinian hotels as well as the exact address of the press station, they still bombed those places on account of the action of self-defense. However, according to journalists around the hotel at that time, they said they did not hear any gunshot at all. So, as a matter of fact, the spokesman of US Department of Defense took advantage of the legitimization strategy through rationality to argue for their mistakes.

Another example is in some degree similar with the first one. In response to the bloodshed in Mosul, there were injured and witnesses who said that the US military fired on civilians. As for this condemn, U.S. Marine Corps Officer James Jarvis said: "Today, we did not fire on the crowd. It was only because someone shot at the Marines and we fought back." Through his discourse, we can make a conclusion that the officer was finding excuses for their brutal attack towards those victims died in the bloodshed. In their words, what they have done is just out of instinctive defensive response. However, it will not influence the nature of Iraq war.

### **Legitimization through Altruism**

There is a method to legitimize our behaviors, as social actors, which is to propose them as actions beneficial to other individuals. Doing things for others, especially the poor, the old, the vulnerable, the innocent, is well-accepted in our society and would do good to help the process of legitimization. It presents the action as beneficial for a community and circumvents choice about the selfishness of the speaker.

In political discourse, politicians claim that their actions will benefit others, where 'others' is normally used to refer to the poor, or people without democracy, equality, freedom of expression and so on. Those values are often western values that western countries somehow assume other countries need or want. And this legitimization strategy justifies its rationale from other people's well-being. The action we need to take will make other people's lives better. And this idea is developed into what Lakoff defined as the plot of a story, specifically speaking, 'The Fairy Tale of the Just War'<sup>[1]</sup>.

In that story, there is always a bad guy, some victims and a hero. If we put that framework into the story of Iraq War, we could obtain a fairy tale written by America: Saddam Hussein is a big evil dictator who rules Iraq people in a brutal and violent way. People who live in that country is severely depressed by the horrible governor. They have to face unfair things and have no right to express their own opinions. In a word, they lead a miserable life and need someone who is friendly as well as capable of saving them from that tragic condition. Thus, the perfect hero America, who satisfies both the two

criterion, appeared. After arduous fight with the evil governor, the hero beat the bad dictator and brought freedom, democracy and happiness to those people who have suffered for years.

At the early period of Iraq War, the American president Bush showed his determination that "The United States must carry out the war to the end until Iraq is liberated." Besides, at the latter stage of Iraq war, the U.S. Department of State spokesman Boucher still pretended to pay attention to the reconstruction of Iraq though America had won the war and achieved their goals like destroying the Saddam government. "The United States will hold the first meeting attended by the Iraqi opposition in the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriya on the 15th. We hope that this meeting as well as a series of subsequent regional meetings can provide a forum for Iraqis to discuss their future and put forward their ideas on the establishment of an interim Iraqi government. At the same time, the US government would soon send 1200 police advisers and judicial experts to Iraq to offer advice on the issue of establishing a new police force in Iraq."

Outwardly, the America government is so friendly and nice that they care about Iraq people's lives and spare no efforts to devote itself to help civilians who suffered to establish a more democratic and righteous political power and help them to build a bright and wonderful future. And all of their actions even the war are for the benefit of Iraqi people. Nevertheless, it is just one of their strategies to legitimize the evil nature of aggressive war and accomplish their own interests. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, the American political officers are expert in using the strategy of legitimization through Altruism.

### Conclusion

Legitimization strategies are inherent in all types of discourse, especially political discourse. This paper first introduces legitimization and legitimation in war, and then briefly summarizes various legitimization strategies. In the third part, under the framework of political discourse legitimization strategy proposed by Reyes, the paper selects four legitimization strategies: legitimization through emotions, legitimization through rationality, legitimization through a hypothetical future and legitimization through altruism to analyze the discourses of American government and military officers in Iraq War. Research shows that American politicians are good at using legitimization strategies in their discourse in order to justify the motives for launching aggressive war and wrong actions of American troops in the war, and finally successfully package an aggressive war for their own interests as a just war for the Iraqi people, which aims to bring democracy and happiness, maintain global peace, and fight against terrorism.

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