

THE STRATEGIC POWER OF LANGUAGE IN DIPLOMATIC NEGOTIATIONS

A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, THE IRAQ-KUWAIT CRISIS, AND THE IRAN NUCLEAR NEGOTIATIONS

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Abstract

Realist scholars say that material power - the size of a country's army or economy – have strong effect on global stage as well as decides the outcomes of diplomatic negotiations. In this view, language is seemed just decoration, however this paper argues that language is not decoration, it is an important factor on its own and plays a crucial role to solve problems or come to compromise. The paper uses Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to compare three historical cases: the talks before Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the letters between Kennedy and Khrushchev during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, and the negotiations that produced the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA). The comparison shows that unclear, vague language made the Iraq-Kuwait crisis more dangerous whereas in the other two cases, careful and flexible language helped the sides reach an agreement. The paper ends with practical lessons for diplomats and is honest about the limits of a study based on only three cases.

Keywords: Diplomatic communication; Communication Accommodation Theory; Cuban Missile Crisis; Iraq-Kuwait crisis; Iran nuclear negotiations; crisis de-escalation

1. Introduction

Diplomacy is usually studied as a contest of power. Yet in many major crises, the outcome depended not only on military or economic strength, but on how leaders communicated with each other, what words they used during negotiations and how diplomats conveyed their purposes in front of other representatives. One vague sentence from an American ambassador is often mentioned as a reason Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. In contrast, a single metaphor used by Nikita Khrushchev, and a careful decision by John F. Kennedy about which letter to answer, are credited with helping the two superpowers avoid nuclear war in October 1962. Decades later, quiet, ongoing talks between American and Iranian officials helped produce a nuclear agreement between two countries with almost no history of trust.

This paper asks a focused question:

How does the wording of diplomatic messages - how direct they are, what images they use, how much they protect the other side's dignity - affect whether a crisis gets worse or gets resolved?

To answer this, the paper uses Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) which was first developed to explain how people adjust their speech to one another, and later applied to groups and institutions (Giles, Soliz, Dragojević, & Gasiorek, 2016). Each of these three crises has been studied many times on its own. What this paper adds is different: it compares all three using the same theory, and it draws out one simple pattern that connects them - a pattern about ambiguity, accommodation, and face-saving, explained in Section 5. This is a qualitative, literature-based study. It does not claim to be a statistically tested analysis, and Section 6 explains this limitation clearly.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Communication Accommodation Theory

Deliberate accommodation means several things: choosing which message from the other side to respond to, describing a conflict as a shared problem instead of a contest, and using language that lets both sides protect their dignity. CAT says that speakers adjust their words, tone, and directness to move closer to - or further from - the person they are talking to (Giles et al., 2016). Moving closer to the other person's style, called convergence, is usually seen as respectful and builds trust. Moving away, called divergence, signals distance or disagreement. In diplomacy, officials rarely reject a proposal outright. Instead of saying "we refuse", they say "this needs further discussion". This is not weakness - it is a way of keeping the conversation open. The same pattern appears in United Nations Security Council documents: a resolution that "expresses grave concern" is far softer than one that "condemns," and this softer wording leaves room for more negotiation later. Linguistic research on Security Council resolutions has shown that vague, hedged wording - sometimes called "weasel words" - is a common and deliberate strategy in this kind of diplomatic text (Scotto di Carlo, 2013).

Metaphors and framing work in a similar way. For example, by describing a dispute as a shared problem rather than a fight, negotiators can shift the mood from rivalry to teamwork (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Entman, 1993). A recent review of fifty years of CAT research confirms that this kind of accommodation is not only found between individuals - it also appears in institutional and media settings, which are structurally similar to diplomacy (Giles, Edwards, & Walther, 2023).

2.2 The Counter-Argument: Language as a Reflection of Power

Realist scholars, most notably John Mearsheimer, argue that words follow power, not the other way around. States act according to their material interests, and diplomatic language is mostly used to justify decisions that have already been made (Mearsheimer, 2001). This is a fair point. Material power clearly mattered in all three cases in this paper. Nevertheless, a more balanced view, developed by constructivist scholars such as Martha Finnemore, is that language does not replace power - it shapes how power is used. Even a very strong state needs to justify its

actions convincingly, or it risks losing international support and cooperation (Finnemore, 2003). This is close to what Joseph Nye called soft power: the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than force (Nye, 2004). Diplomatic language is one of the main tools through which soft power works. The case studies below keep both views - realist and constructivist - in mind at the same time.

3. Research Approach

3.1 Case Selection and Method

This paper compares three cases using a method known as structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005). The cases were chosen because they have very different outcomes: the Iraq-Kuwait crisis ended in war, the Cuban Missile Crisis ended in a fast, peaceful resolution, and the Iran talks ended in a long, negotiated agreement. Comparing cases with different outcomes makes it easier to see which communication patterns are linked to peace and which are linked to conflict.

3.2 Analytical Framework

For each case, the paper asks the same set of questions using historical documents and existing research: Was the language direct or hedged? Did it protect the other side's dignity? Did it use metaphor or shared framing to reduce conflict? This is a qualitative, literature-based method, not a statistical one. No formal coding by multiple researchers was carried out, so no reliability statistics are reported. The argument here is qualitative: that these communication features are linked to how each crisis developed, not that they were formally measured and tested.

4. Case Studies

4.1 The Iraq–Kuwait Crisis (1990): Ambiguity as Risk

On 25 July 1990, U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie met Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, just days before Iraq invaded Kuwait on 2 August. According to the declassified transcript, Glaspie told Hussein the United States took "no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts". Most historians believe she meant to sound neutral, not encouraging. Iraqi leaders appear to have understood the message differently - as a sign that Washington would not act if Iraq invaded Kuwait. Within days, Iraqi troops crossed the border, starting the crisis that led to the Gulf War.

Whatever Glaspie intended, this case shows a key idea from CAT: the same words can be understood very differently depending on the listener's political and cultural background. Careful, neutral language, which Western diplomats usually read as caution, was apparently read by Iraqi leaders as something close to permission. There was no clear warning - no "if you invade, this will happen". This gap in meaning left room for a dangerous misunderstanding.

4.2 The Cuban Missile Crisis (1962): Accommodation as De-escalation

The thirteen days of the Cuban Missile Crisis are one of the most studied events in diplomatic history, especially because of the letters between Kennedy and Khrushchev. On 26 October 1962, Khrushchev sent a personal, emotional letter with a striking image: the crisis was like a knot that, if pulled against, would only have "to be cut", but that both sides could loosen together. A second, tougher letter arrived the next day. It added a public demand - removing U.S. missiles from Turkey - that would have been much harder for Kennedy to accept in public. Kennedy's team chose to answer the first, more cooperative letter, and set the second one aside. Historian Graham Allison calls this a turning point in the crisis (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). This was not just luck, it was a deliberate act of accommodation, in CAT terms: Kennedy chose to engage with Khrushchev's more cooperative framing instead of his more demanding one. Richard Ned Lebow argues that the crisis was resolved less by a change in military power and more by both leaders redefining the standoff as a shared problem, not a contest (Lebow, 2020). This exchange of letters let both leaders make concessions while still looking strong at home - a face-saving outcome that is central to CAT.

4.3 The Iran Nuclear Negotiations (2013–2015): Sustained Accommodation Over Time

The talks that produced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015 are different from the other two cases: they lasted much longer. Formal talks between Iran and the P5+1 (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany) were supported by secret U.S.- Iranian back-channel meetings, which reportedly began in Oman in 2013. That same September, President Obama and President Rouhani had a phone call - a notable gesture of accommodation after decades without direct high-level contact (Parsi, 2017).

Two language patterns stand out in this case. First, negotiators used technical, scientific language - centrifuge numbers, enrichment levels, stockpile limits - instead of political language. This made it easier to reach small agreements step by step, without the conversation becoming purely ideological. Second, the final agreement's wording was built so both sides could claim a form of victory. The statement that Iran keeps the right to a peaceful civilian nuclear program was written broadly enough that Iran could present it at home as a defence of its sovereignty, while the United States could present it as consistent with strict limits on Iran's program. This double meaning acted as a face-saving device that made the deal easier to accept politically in both Tehran and Washington, at least in the short term.

4.4 Comparative Summary

Table 1: Comparative Summary of Diplomatic Communication Features

Dimension	Iraq–Kuwait (1990)	Cuban Missile (1962)	Iran Talks (2013–2015)
Hedging	Low	Medium	High

Convergence toward the other side's style	Low	High	High
Directness	Ambiguous, unclear	Mixed; became more cooperative over time	Gradual, over two years
Face-saving devices	Mostly absent	Present (choosing which letter to answer)	Extensive (both sides could claim victory)
Metaphor / reframing	Minimal	Strong ("knot" image)	Moderate (technical framing)
Outcome	Invasion, Gulf War	Peaceful de-escalation	Negotiated agreement

5. Discussion

Together, the three cases match what CAT would predict: careful, accommodating, face-saving communication is linked to de-escalation, while vague or unclear communication leaves room for dangerous misunderstanding, especially between different political cultures and social backgrounds. The Iraq-Kuwait case shows that ambiguity is not automatically safe. A remark meant as careful neutrality can be read by another audience as a green light. The Cuban and Iranian cases show that deliberate accommodation - choosing which message to answer, reframing a conflict as shared, and letting both sides save face - can open space for compromise that plain threats would close off.

5.1 A Simple Explanatory Sequence

The three cases suggest a simple sequence, which should be treated as a testable hypothesis, not a proven finding, given that it comes from only three cases. Unclear, ambiguous language, without a clear warning, tends to produce misunderstanding - especially when the two sides come from different political and cultural backgrounds, as in the Iraq-Kuwait case. When negotiators instead use accommodation - matching the other side's style, choosing carefully which message to answer, or offering a shared metaphor - this tends to build trust between the people involved, as seen in the Kennedy-Khrushchev letters. When accommodation continues over time and is combined with face-saving language that lets both sides claim an acceptable result, it becomes more likely to produce a lasting agreement, as in the JCPOA case. This sequence - ambiguity leads to misunderstanding; accommodation builds trust; sustained face-saving leads to agreement - is offered here as a hypothesis based on these three cases. It is not a proven causal model. Testing it properly would need a larger set of cases with systematic coding, as discussed in Section 6.

5.2 What This Means for Theory

None of this means the realist argument is wrong. Material power clearly set the limits of what was possible in each case. Kennedy could offer Khrushchev a face-saving option only because both sides badly wanted to avoid nuclear war. The P5+1 could offer sanctions relief only because it had something Iran wanted enough to negotiate for. The argument in this paper is narrower: within the limits set by power and interests, the language chosen by negotiators can make the difference between reaching a peaceful outcome and missing it. In this sense, the cases sit between realism and constructivism rather than proving one wrong. Power sets the boundaries of what is possible. Language decides how much of that possibility is actually reached.

6. Limitations

Four limitations should be stated clearly. First, this is a study of only three cases. It points to a plausible pattern, not a statistically proven relationship. This paper should not be described as a formal content-analysis study with tested reliability, because no such formal multi-researcher coding was carried out. Second, the paper relies on English-language and translated sources. Nuances in the original Russian, Arabic, and Persian are not checked directly. Third, the three cases are not documented equally. The Iraq-Kuwait case relies heavily on a single declassified transcript, while the Cuban and Iranian cases have much larger archives and many more interviews and records available. This difference in documentation may affect how fairly the three cases can be compared. Fourth, the cases were not chosen at random. All three are widely studied partly because their outcomes are dramatic, in opposite directions. A broader, less selectively chosen sample of cases might produce a more complicated picture than the one presented here.

7. Conclusion

None of these three crises was decided by language alone. But in each one, the words chosen by negotiators seem to have shaped whether ambiguity ended in conflict or in compromise. Diplomatic language does not replace power, but it is one of the tools through which power is turned into results - and, as the Glaspie case shows, it is also a tool through which even an unintended signal can be badly misunderstood, with serious consequences.

For practitioners, the cases point to three concrete habits rather than vague advice: avoid ambiguous language in high-stakes situations, especially when you do not know the other side's political culture well; choose carefully which of several messages from the other side to respond to, instead of treating every signal as equally important; and build agreement language that lets every side present a version of the outcome it can defend to its own public. None of these habits guarantees peace. But their absence, as the Iraq-Kuwait case shows, clearly raises the risk of a bad outcome.

Future research should test the ambiguity-accommodation-agreement sequence proposed in Section 5.1 on a larger, more carefully chosen set of diplomatic crises - ideally fifteen to twenty cases - using discourse analysis of original-language sources, rather than the three-case, secondary-source design used here.

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