Legitimizing Analysis of Political Discourse from the Perspective of Proximization Theory: Visualized Modeling of Interim National Security Strategic Guidance Based on Visio

Haoshuang Liu*, Xiongyong Cheng

School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou Henan, China
*Corresponding author

Keywords: Discourse space, legitimization, proximization theory, STA model, visualized analysis

Abstract: Based on the proximization theory and relying on Visio, this paper analyzed and visualized *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* through the Spatial-Temporal-Axiological (STA) proximization model. The qualitative description and quantitative analysis were adopted to analyze the main view from the United States so as to dynamically locate the direction of US policies. The findings indicate: (1) First-person deixis, phrasal verbs denoting displacement, and noun phrases denoting substantive influence were used to present the dynamic aggression of external entities and the passive state of internal entities; (2) A full-range temporal presentation was adopted to highlight the persistence of threats, and large numbers of present-future time representations were used to present the image of a responsible state; (3) Abstract nouns with emotion were employed to present the binary opposition between internal and external entities to construct the receiver's positive cognition of internal entities and negative cognition of external entities. The research results might deepen readers' profound understanding of proximization theory and provide a referential perspective for the better presentation of the research results of political discourse.

1. Introduction

Discourse is the material carrier of ideology and is closely inlaid with politics. Political discourse is an effective medium for the construction of modern national identity, shaping socio-political reality and influencing people's political perceptions. Legitimization is embedded in all discourses and is a justification for certain words and actions, while proximization theory provides the argument for legitimization.

Since the introduction of PT by Cap [1], many scholars have combined different research methods and applied PT to the discourse analysis of various topics. Currently, there are two main types of empirical studies applying PT, one is a comparative study for different languages and different political identities, and the other is monolingual empirical research.

Comparative studies include comparisons of different political identities for the same topic, as well as comparisons of source and target languages. The fields of the comparison of different political identities include politics [2], public health [3-4], environment [5-6] and so on.

Scholars have conducted empirical monolingual studies on topics such as politics, economy, public health, culture and education, and ecology. In Politics, there are topics on anti-terrorism war [7-8], diplomatic discourse analysis [8-10], political leaders' speeches [11-12] and so on.

Proximization theory, as a cognitive discursive strategy, operates by the speaker manipulating language and influencing the addressee. This influence is usually in the form of direct or indirect threats. The discursive strategy of proximization leads the addressee to construct a threat discourse system and explore threat generation patterns, thereby triggering fear in the addressee and laying a legitimate foundation for political counteraction. Thus, the application of proximization theory to political discourse helps to explore how political discourse is cleverly designed to add legitimacy to its political intentions.

2. Literature Review

Proximization theory [13] is a theory about constructing crises and threats. Its primary purpose is to interpret how speakers construct a three-dimensional discourse space in the minds of the audience and legitimize their precautions through discourse strategies. The three-dimensional discourse space is constructed by the three axes of space, time and value, namely spatial proximization, temporal proximization and axiological proximization. In this space discourse, the inside-the-deictic-center entities (IDCs) usually refer to speakers and listeners, and beyond IDCs are the outside-the-deictic-center entities (ODCs) that pose threats to IDCS. Through words, speakers use spatial proximization, temporal proximization and axiological proximization to depict a scenario that ODCs impend over IDCs so as to evoke fear and oppressive feeling in listeners, and eventually legalize their own words.

As a strategic construal operation, spatial proximization refers to the process in which peripheral entities (ODCs) continually approach central entities (IDCs) in physical space [14]. The desimilarity between center and periphery can related with geographic and geopolitical distance. The central and peripheral entities are opposing, so in spatial proximization, speakers intentionally make listeners be aware of the threat generated by peripheral entities, which can only be avoided by taking the necessary actions [14].

Temporal proximization is centered on the present, reflecting the conceptual movement of time. For instance, speakers forcibly shift the negative impact of past events to the present and the negative impact of possible future events to the present [13]. The purpose is to make a cognitive panic to the recipient of the discourse, thereby justifying the action that the discourse and the speaker take.

Axiological proximization refers to an artificially coercive conflict caused by the ideological confrontation between the central and peripheral entities in the discourse space. The ideological conflict accumulated between the IDC and ODC is a real conflict, and it can actually affect the IDC.

3. Research Material

The *Interim National Security Strategy of the United States of America* is a national strategy that the U.S. president regularly presents to Congress, usually to illustrate the political stance of the government and to draw the attention of the international community. This paper takes the *Interim National Security Strategy of the United States of America* released in 2022 as the research material. This study uses proximization theory as the analytical framework to analyze how the *Interim*

National Security Strategy of the United States of America construct and legitimize the political discourse.

This paper bases on *Interim National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (*Strategy*, henceforth) to build a small corpus with a Capacity of 7909 words, analyzes the legitimation basis of *Strategy*, and uses the UAM Corpus Tool 3.3 software to quantitatively classify the lexico-grammatical items representing the proximization strategy in *Strategy* by relying on Cap's[13] three dimensions of proximization theory. To ensure data reliability, the author conducted three marker-quantitative classifications of *Strategy* to precisely derive their respective frequencies as the basis of the study. Finally, the author visualized *Strategy* in the form of STA model using Visio software to deepen readers' understanding of proximization theory and provide a reference perspective for the presentation of proximization research results.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Proximization theory projects an external threat into the proximal area of the addressee, making the addressee aware of the looming threat and highlighting the need for preventive measures, with the ultimate goal of presenting the legitimacy of the speaker's actions or reinforcing the de-legitimization of the other people's behavior.

4.1. Spacial Proximization

Spatial proximization refers to the gradual physical invasion of IDCs (speakers and hearers) caused by ODCs in the discourse space, which is mainly reflected in the usage of some noun phrases and verb phrases. It includes six categories: (1) Noun Phrases (NPs) are identified as elements in the deictic center of discourse space (IDC); (2) Noun Phrases (NPs) are identified as elements outside the deictic center of discourse space (ODC); (3) Verb Phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality constructed as markers of movement of ODCs toward the deictic center; (4) Verb Phrases (VPs) of action are constructed as markers of the influence exerted by ODCs upon IDCs; (5) Abstract noun phrases (NPs)are constructed as expectations of the influence exerted by ODCs upon IDCs; (6) the noun phrase (NPs) indicates the result of the impact of ODCs on IDCs[13]. The following subsections showcase the spatial dimension of PT in environmental. The detailed sub-categories are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Spatial Proximization in *Strategy*

category	Key lexical-grammatical items	frequency
1	the United States, the American people, government, we, working families	79
2	global pandemic, infectious disease, coercive economic practice, they, cyber theft, violent extremism, terrorism	75
3	deteriorate, pose dangers, pose threats, erode, exacerbate, aggravate	23
4	create threats, hurt, undercut, threaten, prevent	18
5	shared crisis, future threats, challenges, dangers,, risk, conflict, stress, burdens, malign action, catastrophe	21
6	debt crisis, mounting crisis, recession, rapid change, food insecurity acute danger	68
total		284

4.1.1. Noun Phrases (NPs) as Elements in IDC and ODC

Strategy repeatedly uses the collective pronoun "we" to construct in-group members so as to close the psychological distance and spatial standing between the speaker and the hearer. What's more, "we" can also be used to evoke political empathy in the addressee, and to exploit the emotions of the addressee for the purpose of persuasion.

Example (1): "Our strength is multiplied when we combine efforts to address common challenges, share burdens, and broaden the circle of cooperation."

In example (1), "we" refers to the United States and other countries with the same interests, which is an inclusive "we". Example (1) abandons the "self" of a single cognitive subject and turns to the "we" of the group, leading the addressee to build a cognitive consensus to achieve emotional resonance, presenting a discourse space of mental intercommunication, and paving the way for the legitimization of the cooperation will proposed later.

In addition, "the United States", "government", "working families" and "our allies and partners" and so on are also included in the IDC camp. This approach adds the attribute of national will to the *Strategy*, and at the same time reflects the image of the government as the person in charge who cares about the interests of workers, broadening the scope of the *Strategy*'s audience and legal acceptance.

In general, in the distribution of ODC and IDC constructions, IDC (n = 79) and ODC (n = 75) appear roughly the same number of times in the *Strategy*, visually presenting IDC and ODC as evenly matched, but the grammatical structure of the discourse in which ODC approaches IDC breaks the original situation, showing the aggressive dynamics of ODC and the passive state of IDC, exposing the spreading and plundering nature of ODC, thus activating the fear of ODC among the addressees and providing legitimate evidence for IDC to counteract.

4.1.2. Verb Phrases (VPs) as Markers of Movement and the Influence Exerted by ODCs

Motion and directional verb phrases (VPs) indicate the proximity of ODCs to IDCs in physical spac. This is a dynamic process of inward motion that causes hearers to feel the constant approach of ODCs, resulting in a sense of oppression, tension, and anxiety. Practical examples are presented below:

Example (2): "We will take special aim at confronting corruption, which rots democracy from the inside and is increasingly weaponized by authoritarian states to undermine democratic institutions."

In example (2), the forces of corruption within the democratic state (ODC) are the prospect of movement, and the democratic system (IDC) is the context of movement, which is the intended target of the movement. The verbs "rot" and "undermine" show the different value attributes of both parties. The whole sentence indicates that the corrupt forces within the democratic state (ODC) initiate the proximization behavior and the democratic system (IDC) suffers the consequences. The addressee perceives in the grammatical structure that the distance between the two sides is shrinking and feels that the proximity field is constantly challenged. At the same time, "rot" and "undermine" show a tendency of ODC's aggressive behavior is spreading deeper and deeper inward, intensifying the low legitimacy of ODC.

The author observed in Table 1 that the *Strategy* focuses on showing ODC's proximization dynamics (n = 23) rather than proximization results (n = 18) with the help of VPs, presenting the grammatical construction of "ODC+VPs+IDC", where the starting point of the movement is ODC and the ending point is IDC, and the value attributes of the two entities are opposite so as to enhance the upset emotional impact of the addressee.

4.1.3. Noun Phrases (NPs) as Expect Influence and Actual Impact Exerted by ODCs

These abstract noun groups are constructed as expectations of ODC's impact on IDC, which means that ODC's influential behaviors and forces may have an impact on IDC that is not happening now, but may cause harm in the future. This is a prediction that uses a noun group to express this expectation. The specific usage of this sub-strategy are as follows:

Example (3): "Nationalist and nativist trends, accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis, produce an every-country-for-itself mentality that leaves us all more isolated, less prosperous, and less safe."

In example (3), COVID-19 (ODC) has intensified nationalist and nativist (ODC) forces that are already causing real harm to the United States (IDC), causing alarm among the recipients. "More isolated", "less prosperous" and "less safe" distances the psychological standpoint of ODC and IDC and presents the antagonism between ODC and IDC. In addition, by understanding the grammatical structure of "accelerate", the addressee perceives the violation of his own domain, which further intensifies the de-legitimization of ODC's behavior.

The author observed in Table 1 that the *Strategy* relies on NPs (n = 89) to distant the psychological standpoint of both parties rather than on VPs (n = 41) to bring them closer physically. In addition, the *Strategy* favors NPs to characterize ODCs as an existing threat (n = 68) rather than an anticipated threat (n = 21), and the damage to real interests is more likely to stimulate respondents' antipathy toward ODCs and add legitimacy to IDC countermeasures.

4.2. Temporal Proximization

Temporal proximization refers to the past and future events approaching the present and having an impact on the present. It includes five categories: (1) the use of non-definitive descriptive noun phrases for constructing the impact of ODC on other times; (2) the use of the simple past tense and the present perfect tense; (3) the use of nominalized phrases to presuppose the impact of ODC on any future time; (4) the use of modal verb phrases to construct a lasting impact of ODCs on the present and the future and (5) the use of contrasting sentences to construct the alienated world in the future. The detailed sub-categories are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The Temporal Proximization in *Strategy*

category	Key lexical-grammatical items	frequency
1	in years ahead, in the coming months and years	3
2	did , have done, had done, be doing, will	19
3	threat, challenge	13
4	will, can, should, must	21
total		56

4.2.1. Temporal Key Lexical-grammatical Items Represent Present - Future

Looking at Table 2, the author finds that the *Strategy* focuses on the present-future time category term (n = 24) to presuppose the ODC threat and to present a responsible image of the government actively addressing the threat. For example:

Example (4): "We will also join with the international community to combat the continuing threat posed by COVID19 and other infectious diseases with pandemic potential."

Example (4) constructs ODC's influence in the present-future time frame, and the uncertainty of future time gives the addressee a certain degree of space to negotiate threat response, but "continuing" portrays the dynamic erosion process of the COVID-19 (ODC), activating the addressee's "Now" frames and creates a rapidly approaching of ODC in discourse space within the

perception of the addressees. In addition, "will" also reflects the government's immediate initiatives and long-term plans to respond to the epidemic, reflecting the government's active and responsible image and adding legitimacy to its political actions.

4.2.2. The "Full Frame" Representation of Temporal Proximization

The author observes that the Strategy finds that tense changes (n = 19) are used to create a "full frame" state of time, portraying the image of ODC as ubiquitous and ever-present. For example:

Example 5: "The climate crisis has been centuries in the making, and even with aggressive action, the United States and the world will experience increasing weather extremes and environmental stress in years ahead."

Example (4) is a typical multi-temporal discourse form, including the past-present time indicator "has been centuries", the modal word "will" and the future non-finite imitative word "in years ahead". The scope of the indications covers the beginning and end of the timeline, presenting the climate crisis (ODC) in the form of a "full frame" of time. In addition, the *Strategy* lays out the consequences of letting the climate crisis go unchecked: the world will suffer increasingly extreme weather and environmental stresses.

4.3. Axiological Proximization

Axiological Proximization refers to the dichotomy between the hometown values of the IDC and the foreign and oppositional values of the ODC. Speakers attempt to avoid the implications of the latter approaching the former and emphasize the justification of current behavior. This encompasses two aspects: (1) IDCs denote noun groups of positive values or ideologies and (2) ODCs denote noun groups of negative values or ideologies. The detailed sub-categories are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The Axiological Proximization in *Strategy*

category	Key lexical-grammatical items	frequency
1	adjustments, norms, agreements, campaign, innovation, strategy, secure	52
2	insecurity, poverty, economic downturn, inequality, disruptive, aggressive action	33
total		85

4.3.1. Noun Phrases Representing Positive Values or Ideologies of IDCs

Based on the above spatial proximization analysis, the *Strategy* distinguishes two different camps, and words with high emotional value such as "stability" and "prosperous" portray a positive and legitimate image of the IDC camp (n = 52), while words such as "campaign" and "cooperation" indicate that the common response of IDC to the crisis has been reflected in the central value axis of denotation, which is a common value demand of the discourse participants and reflects the collective effectiveness of the *Strategy*.

Example (6): "We will lead in promoting shared norms and forge new agreements on emerging technologies, space, cyber space, health and biological threats, climate and the environment, and human rights."

Example (6) uses the journey metaphor, which is often a phased activity toward a set correct goal and presents a positive evaluation of the ontology. The "we" as Strategy of the journey reflects the reliability of governmental decisions. In addition, "shared norms" and "new agreements" are conceptualized as journey endpoints with positive meanings, implying the positive direction of

future policies and guiding the interlocutors to construct positive perceptions of the measures in the *Strategy*.

4.3.2. Noun Phrases Representing Negative Values or Ideologies of ODCs

Strategy relies on terms such as "corruption", "economic downturn", "aggressive" and "destructive" to portray a negative image of the ODC (n = 33) so as to avoid large-scale ideological conflicts to a certain extent while constructing a confrontational image of both sides. For IDC, ODC is dangerous, and in order to protect their legitimate rights and interests, the addressees recognize the need to take defensive measures to pave the way for the legitimization of the *Strategy*.

Example (7): "Russia remains determined to enhance its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage."

In example (7), the stage metaphor is used to interpret the abstract international society into a relatively concrete and comprehensible performance stage, and interpersonal interactions are conceptualized as performances on the stage, so that the interlocutors can clearly understand Russia's de-legitimization in the international society. In addition, the evaluative function of the stage metaphor assigns value judgments to the behavior of each member state, such as "disruptive" presents negative value judgments of Russia, leading the addressees to construct a discourse space with the US as the in-group and Russia as the out-group, presenting the heterogeneity of Russian and US values, and thus mobilizing the addressee's emotions and legitimating political actions.

4.4. Visualized Model of Proximization in Strategy

This paper uses Visio software to construct a visualization of the *Strategy* (shown in Figure 1) based on specific lexical items and their frequency of occurrence and analysis of specific examples to further explore the basis of the legitimacy of *Strategy*.
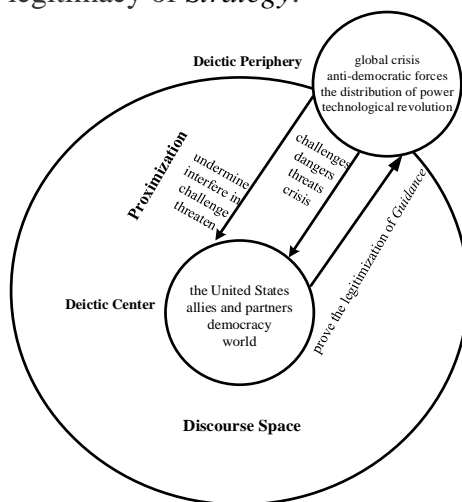

Figure 1: STA model of *Strategy*

5. Conclusion

Legitimization is a fundamental concept in political discourse and the ultimate pursuit of politicians. proximization theory supplemented by legitimization strategies effectively explains the process of constructing the threat discourse system. This paper systematically reveals the legitimacy of the *Interim National Security* Strategy *of the United States of America* under the framework of proximization theory.

Strategy strives to present a tripartite proximization features including space, time and value. For one thing, *Strategy* constructs the nature of conflicting interests between internal and external groups, and focuses on the choice of first-person indicative pronouns to close the psychological distance between the addressee and the IDC. In addition, *Strategy* relies on the VPs to interpret the aggressive dynamics of ODC and the passive state of IDC, and relies on the NPs to render the substantive threat posed by ODC to IDC, leading the addressees to construct the psychological tendency of blaming ODC. Secondly, *Strategy* relies on the temporal proximization strategy to illustrate the persistence of ODC threat in the past-present-future and its step-by-step properties, presenting the threat of ODC as not to be underestimated. In addition, *Strategy* emphasizes the use of present-future representations to portray the persistent threat of ODC and the responsible image of the state in dealing with the threat, which manipulates the respondents' psychological estimation of the ever-present threat of ODC and enhances their acceptance and approval of the state policy. Third, *Strategy* makes use of emotional color words with positive and negative meanings and abstract nouns to modify the two entities, embellishing the positive words of IDC to bring positive, legitimate, and safe emotions to the addressees, presenting high emotional values, and prompting them to understand and support the behavior of IDC. In contrast, negative words that embellish ODC create negative, illegitimate, and fearful emotions in the addressee, present low emotional value, and make the addressee perceive the heterogeneity of ODC values. In addition, metaphorical words have the use of enhancing proximization emotional appeals, and the speaker uses the value judgment and orientation of the metaphorical mechanism to guide the addressee to perceive the legitimacy of IDC and the de-legitimization of ODC, and thus to establish cooperative organizations or to provoke conflict.

Finally, this paper visualizes the *Strategy* with the help of Visio software and relies on the STA model to visualize and interpret in detail the Biden administration's blueprint for responding to threats. It is also intended to deepen the reader's understanding of proximization theory and to provide a useful perspective for the presentation of research findings on political discourse.

To a certain extent, this paper expands the parsing dimension of political discourse and explores its depth connotation, which receives due effect and achieves the expected goal. However, this paper focuses on the *Interim National Security* Strategy *of the United States of America* as a corpus, and the universality of the study is still somewhat lacking. It would be more effective if a further comparative analysis of the *Strategy* made by the United States in recent years is also conducted.

References

[1] Cap, P. (2008) towards the proximization model of the analysis of legitimization in political discourse. Journal of Pragmatics, 40, 17-41.
[2] Pan, Dong. (2017) Proximization: A New Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis. Shandong Foreign Language Teaching, 4, 9-16.
[3] Yao, Zhenmei. (2021) discursive construction of community in combating COVID-19 from the perspective of Proximization Theory. Foreign Studies, 3, 42-48+107-108.
[4] Sun, Sucha (2018) A Study on the Construction of English Classroom Discourse System from the Perspective of Proximization theory. Journal of Lvliang Education Institute, 4, 96-100.
[5] Guo, Jingyi. (2020) A Study of the Environmental Discourse in Light of Proximization Theory. Overseas English, 15, 1-2+12.
[6] Wu, Jianguo & Niu, Junfeng. (2018) Analyzing Legitimization in Political Discourse from the Perspective of Proximization Theory: A Case Study of Trump's Immigration Policy. Foreign Languages in China, 6, 48-53.
[7] Cap, P. (2014) Applying cognitive pragmatics to critical discourse studies: A proximization analysis of three public space discourses. Journal of Pragmatics, 70, 16-30.
[8] Fang, Ying & Yu, Dongming. (2021) The Jews under Threat in the Play Incident at Vichy as Viewed from the Perspective of proximization Theory. Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 3, 106-115+159.

[9] Hart, C. (2010) Critical Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Science: New Perspectives on Immigration Discourse. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[10] Liao, Genfu & Wu, Meng. (2019) Deconstructing the Trump Administration's China Image-making from Proximization Theory. Journal of Huaibei Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences), 3, 74-79.

[11] Wu, Jianguo & Lin, Jinrong & Su, Yi. (2016) A New Method of Critical Discourse Analysis--Proximization. Journal of Foreign Languages, 5, 75-82.

[12] Tang, Xianqing & Wu, Bingcheng. (2021) Political Linguistics: A New Interdisciplinary Branch of Linguistics. Journal of Social Science of Hunan Normal University, 1, 106-113.

[13] Cap, P. (2013) Proximization: The Pragmatics of Symbolic Distance Crossing. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

[14] Cap, P. (2014) Applying cognitive pragmatics to critical discourse studies: A proximization analysis of three public space discourses. Journal of Pragmatics, 70, 16-30.