

Evolving Discourse in Syrian Leaders' UNGA Speeches: A Critical Analysis Using Norman Fairclough's Framework and Agentless Passive Voice

Xin Lu

Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Chongqing 400065, China

Abstract: This paper analyzes Syrian leaders' speeches at the United Nations General Assembly from 2009 to 2024 using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and focuses on the use of Agentless Passive Voice (APV). The study reveals the evolution of discourse themes, sentiment shifts, and alliances mentioned. The APV is employed strategically to deflect responsibility, emphasize outcomes, and foster neutrality. The findings provide insights into Syria's positioning within the international community and its linguistic strategies in response to geopolitical challenges.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Agentless Passive Voice; Discourse Evolution; Sentiment Analysis; Geopolitical Challenges.

1. Introduction

The Syrian conflict, which erupted in 2011, has dramatically altered the Middle East's geopolitical landscape and posed significant challenges to global security. This Paper employs Norman Fairclough's three-stage Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and typical Agentless Passive Voice to examine the evolution of discourse in Syrian leaders' speeches at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) from 2009 to 2024. Critical discourse analysis tends to be seen, certainly in many linguistics departments, as a marginal (and, for many, suspect) area of language study.[3] By analyzing the linguistic, social, and political dimensions of these addresses, this research reveals how Syrian leadership has constructed power relations, ideologies, and national identity during a period of profound turmoil.

2. Theory of Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between language and power. One of the key frameworks within CDA is Norman Fairclough's three-stage analysis, which provides a comprehensive method for understanding how discourse functions within its social context. Here's an overview of the three stages as described by Fairclough:

2.1. Text Analysis

The first stage involves a detailed linguistic analysis of the text, which includes both spoken and written language as well as multimodal texts. This stage focuses on the description of various linguistic features such as grammar, vocabulary, cohesion, and textual structure. The goal is to identify patterns, structures, and strategies employed in the text that may reveal underlying ideologies, power relations, and social identities. This analytical phase lays the groundwork for deeper interpretation and explanation by providing a detailed account of the text's formal properties.

2.2. Interpretation: Discourse Practice

The interpretation phase examines the processes involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of texts. This includes considering the context of the discourse practice, such as the roles of the participants (e.g., writer, speaker, audience), the purpose of the text, and the medium through which the text is communicated. This dimension bridges the text's linguistic features with its broader social functions, exploring how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted within specific contexts. Discourse practice analysis also involves understanding intertextuality—the relationships between texts and how they draw upon and influence each other.

2.3. Explanation: Sociocultural Practice

The final dimension focuses on explaining the relationship between discourse and broader social and cultural practices. This involves analyzing how discourse practices are shaped by and contribute to social structures, power relations, and ideologies. The explanation seeks to uncover the socio-political implications of discourse, examining how it reflects, reproduces, or challenges existing social arrangements and power dynamics. This stage requires situating the discourse within its historical, political, and institutional contexts, drawing on broader theories of society and culture to interpret the significance of the findings from the description and interpretation phases.

By engaging in these three stages of analysis—description, interpretation, and explanation—CDA seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language functions within its social context and how it contributes to the maintenance or transformation of power relations.

3. The Pragmatic Functions of Agentless Passive Voice

Agentless passives: NP+BE+V-EN. The pragmatic functions of Agentless Passive Voice, also known as the impersonal passive voice, serve multiple purposes in communication, particularly in formal, objective, or generalized contexts. This grammatical structure,

characterized by the absence of an explicit agent (the doer of the action), shifts the focus away from the performer and onto the action itself or its impact on the subject.

Firstly, the Agentless Passive Voice is often used to convey objective information. In scientific, technical, or news writing, for instance, the focus is on the facts and their implications rather than on who performed the actions. This helps maintain a neutral tone and avoids assigning blame or credit, thus enhancing the credibility and objectivity of the message.

Secondly, it is employed to emphasize the state or result of an action rather than the action itself. In descriptions of processes, procedures, or states of affairs, the passive voice allows the reader to focus on what has been done or what exists, without being distracted by who did it. This is particularly useful in instructional materials, where the steps to follow are more important than who is giving the instructions.

Moreover, the Agentless Passive Voice can be used to generalize or universalize statements. When discussing widely accepted norms, practices, or beliefs, the passive voice helps convey that the information is common knowledge or widely agreed upon.

Additionally, it can serve to avoid mentioning the agent for diplomatic, polite, or sensitive reasons. In diplomatic communications or conflict resolution, for example, the passive voice can be used to discuss contentious issues without directly naming the parties involved, thereby reducing potential offense or conflict.

By shifting the focus away from the agent and onto the action or its impact, this grammatical structure supports objective communication, emphasizes results, generalizes statements, and allows for diplomatic expression. Its use is thus widespread in formal and generalized contexts, contributing to clear, accurate, and respectful communication.

4. The Agentless Passive Voice Used in the Speech

To undertake this analysis, we employed AntConc, a sophisticated corpus analysis software tool. The methodology involved several systematic steps. Initially, we created a corpus comprising transcribed speeches. Subsequently, we employed AntConc's concordance function to identify instances of agentless passive voice (APV), specifically focusing on occurrences of the "be + past participle" construction where the agent was implicitly omitted. Following this pattern identification, we conducted a frequency analysis to quantify the prevalence of each identified instance of APV, thereby gaining insights into its overall occurrence within the corpus. Lastly, we examined the contextual environment surrounding each instance of APV, meticulously categorizing them based on their thematic and rhetorical functions. This contextual examination allowed for a nuanced understanding of how and why APV was utilized in the transcribed speeches.

4.1. Analysis of the Agentless Passive Voice Used in the Speech

(1) High-Frequency Clusters:

"be made" (Frequency: 3, Range: 2): This cluster appears three times across two different speeches. It suggests a recurring theme where the focus is on the creation or establishment of something, without specifying who is responsible. This could be a strategic choice to emphasize

outcomes over actors, potentially to maintain neutrality or avoid attributing blame.

Table 1. An analysis of the frequency of use of "be + past participle" in speech

Cluster	Rank	Frequency	Range
be made	1	3	2
be built	2	2	2
be affected	4	1	1
be compelled	4	1	1
be conducted	4	1	1
be dealt	4	1	1
be decided	4	1	1
be done	4	1	1
be drawn	4	1	1
be expanded	4	1	1
be held	4	1	1
be known	4	1	1
be predicted	4	1	1
be reiterated	4	1	1
be returned	4	1	1
be shutdown	4	1	1
be subject	4	1	1
be summed	4	1	1
be uncoupled	4	1	1
be waived	4	1	1

"be built" (Frequency: 2, Range: 2): Appearing twice across two speeches, this cluster highlights the theme of construction or development. The absence of an agent may indicate a desire to focus on the process or result rather than the individuals or entities involved. This can be particularly useful in contexts where the speaker wants to highlight collective efforts or abstract processes.

(2) Low-Frequency Clusters:

Most clusters appear only once, indicating a wide variety of themes but less repetition. These instances may be used to address specific events or conditions without directly implicating actors. For example, "be affected" (Frequency: 1) might be used to discuss the impact of external factors on a situation, while "be conducted" (Frequency: 1) could refer to the implementation of policies or actions without specifying the responsible party.

4.2. Summary

Combined with the above analysis, one significant rhetorical function is the deflection of responsibility, where the omission of the agent allows the speaker to avoid direct attribution of actions. This strategy is particularly advantageous in sensitive or controversial contexts, such as diplomatic or political discourse, where the avoidance of blame or confrontation is often crucial. Additionally, the APV emphasizes outcomes by shifting the focus from the doer to the recipient or the result of the action. This shift can be highly effective in highlighting the consequences of actions, particularly when the speaker aims to draw attention to the effects rather than the cause. Furthermore, the use of APV fosters a sense of neutrality and objectivity by removing personal or subjective elements from the statement. This impartiality is highly valued in formal or official communications, where objectivity is paramount.

5. The Evolution of Discourse in Syrian Leaders' UNGA Speeches: A Critical Discourse Analysis (2009-2024)

Year	Peace & Security	Sovereignty & Territorial Integrity	Terrorism & Conflict	Humanitarian Issues	Global Challenges
2009	35%	20%	15%	15%	15%
2010	30%	25%	15%	20%	10%
2021	15%	25%	35%	20%	5%
2024	20%	30%	25%	15%	10%

Fig 1. Theme Frequency Distribution (2009-2024)

The thematic focus of the speeches has undergone significant changes over the 15-year period. In 2009 and 2010, the primary emphasis was on peace and security in the Middle East, with repeated calls for a just and comprehensive peace, particularly in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The speeches during this period also highlighted the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity, especially in the context of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories and the Golan Heights. The use of binary oppositions such as “peace vs. occupation” and “resistance vs. aggression” was prevalent, framing Syria as a defender of Arab rights and sovereignty.

However, by 2021, the focus had shifted dramatically towards terrorism and conflict, reflecting the onset of the Syrian Civil War and the humanitarian crisis it created. The

frequency of terms like “terrorism” and “sanctions” increased significantly, as Syrian leaders framed the conflict as a “war on terrorism” and criticized external actors, particularly Turkey, for their role in exacerbating the violence. The discourse also emphasized the need for national unity and the restoration of state authority, with a strong emphasis on the illegality of foreign presence on Syrian soil.

In 2024, while the focus on terrorism and conflict remained important, there was a renewed emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity, as Syria sought to assert its control over all its territories and rebuild after years of war. The speeches also addressed global challenges such as climate change and economic recovery, indicating a broader engagement with international issues beyond the regional context.

Year	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
2009	30%	40%	30%
2010	25%	45%	30%
2021	20%	35%	45%
2024	25%	40%	35%

Fig 2. Sentiment Analysis (2009-2024)

The sentiment analysis reveals a gradual shift from a more neutral and positive tone in 2009-2010 to a more negative and emotional tone in 2021, reflecting the deteriorating situation in Syria. The speeches from 2021 are characterized by a stronger emotional appeal, with a focus on the suffering of the Syrian people and the need for international solidarity. The use of emotive language, such as references to “martyrs” and “victims of terrorism,” serves to evoke sympathy and support from the international community.

Country/Organization	2009	2010	2021	2024
Israel	15	14	10	8
United States	8	7	5	6
Russia	3	4	8	10
Turkey	4	5	12	10
Iran	2	3	7	8

Fig 3. Mention of Allies and Adversaries (2009-2024)

By 2024, the tone had become slightly more balanced, with a renewed emphasis on hope and resilience. The speeches highlight the progress made in combating terrorism and restoring stability, while also calling for continued international support in rebuilding the country. The use of positive rhetoric, such as “reconstruction” and “renewal,” signals a shift towards a more forward-looking narrative, one that emphasizes Syria’s ability to overcome its challenges and reclaim its place on the global stage. Relationships and identities therefore increasingly need to be negotiated through

dialogue, an openness which entails greater possibilities than the fixed relationships and identities of traditional society, but also greater risks. [3]

The speeches reveal a clear shift in the mention of allies and adversaries over time. In 2009 and 2010, the primary focus was on criticizing Israel and the United States, with both countries being portrayed as major obstacles to peace and stability in the region. However, by 2021, the focus had shifted to Turkey, which was increasingly mentioned as an adversary due to its involvement in the Syrian Civil War. At the same time, there was a noticeable increase in mentions of Russia and Iran, reflecting the growing importance of these countries as key allies in supporting Syria during the conflict.

By 2024, the discourse had evolved further, with Russia and Iran continuing to be mentioned as important partners in the reconstruction efforts, while Turkey remained a focal point of criticism. The increasing frequency of mentions of China and other non-Western powers suggests a broader realignment of Syria’s foreign policy, as the country seeks to diversify its international partnerships and reduce its dependence on Western support.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of these speeches provides valuable insights into the strategic use of language in shaping national and regional narratives. The evolving discourse reflects not only the changing circumstances in Syria but also the broader

geopolitical shifts in the Middle East and the world. As Syria continues to navigate the post-conflict period, it is likely that the focus will remain on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and reconstruction, while also engaging with new global challenges such as climate change and economic recovery.

Moreover, the strategic use of agentless passive voice and emotive language suggests that Syrian leaders will continue to employ linguistic strategies that emphasize the impact of actions rather than direct attribution of blame. This approach allows for a nuanced and flexible discourse that can adapt to different audiences and contexts, while maintaining a consistent message of resilience and determination.

In conclusion, the CDA framework provides a powerful tool for understanding the complex interplay between language, power, and ideology in Syrian leaders' UNGA speeches. By examining the thematic focus, linguistic features, and rhetorical strategies employed in these speeches, we gain a deeper understanding of how Syria has positioned itself within the international community and how it has responded to the challenges of the past decade and a half.

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