

Proximization as a Cognitive Mechanism in the Construction of Political Threat

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how political discourse constructs a sense of threat through the cognitive–pragmatic process of proximization. Addressing the methodological gap in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), it integrates Proximization Theory with Discourse Space Theory (DST) to explain how linguistic strategies collapse symbolic distance and legitimize political action. DST provides the socio-cognitive framework through which proximization operates along spatial, temporal, and axiological dimensions. Using a socio-cognitive discourse-analytic design, the study analyzes a political speech by Benjamin Netanyahu (UN General Assembly, 2025), coding each clause for its proximization function. Statistical results ($\chi^2(2) = 25.47, p < .001$) indicate a non-random distribution of proximization markers, dominated by axiological cues. These findings demonstrate that spatial contraction, temporal acceleration, and moral intensification jointly construct a trajectory moving the “Other” toward the deictic center, thereby reinforcing ideological alignment and legitimizing political intervention. The study contributes theoretically by integrating DST and proximization into a unified model of ideological cognition, methodologically by combining qualitative mapping and quantitative validation, and practically by illuminating how political actors linguistically manage perception of threat and legitimacy in global diplomacy.



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1. Introduction

Threat construction has become a central concern in critical analyses of political communication (Sánchez Medero, 2021; Sorensen, 2024), as contemporary actors increasingly rely on discourse to mobilize public affect, legitimize policy interventions, and reframe geopolitical developments as imminent dangers. Political speakers routinely foreground compressed spatial and temporal trajectories and intensify moral distinctions between an in-group and an oppositional out-group (Abdelwahab et al., 2023; Denning & Hodges, 2022). These discursive operations shape public understandings of risk and facilitate alignment with preferred policy responses. Proximization has emerged as a particularly productive concept within this line of inquiry because it models how symbolic distance is collapsed to present distant actors as encroaching threats (Cap, 2008, 2014). Studies consistently demonstrate that such shifts from distance to proximity enable political narratives (Antinyan et al., 2021) to move from descriptive commentary to prescriptive demands for action in contexts of security and crisis.

Although proximization has been extensively theorized, its linguistic realization has rarely been connected in a systematic way to the socio-cognitive architecture proposed in Discourse Space Theory (DST) (Chilton, 2010). DST formalizes how discourse participants, events, and values are organized across spatial, temporal, and axiological coordinates, yet its relationship to proximization strategies is often treated implicitly rather than analytically elaborated (Cap, 2010). This absence of explicit mapping creates conceptual uncertainty about how Self–Other trajectories unfold within a structured cognitive domain. Existing scholarship has tended to emphasize qualitative interpretation of proximization patterns, which limits the ability to determine whether proximization markers reflect deliberate rhetorical strategy or merely localized stylistic preference (Abuarrāh, 2016). As a result, methodological precision remains underdeveloped, particularly with respect to the distributional behavior of proximization indicators.

This study investigates how a political speaker deploys spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization to construct a sense of encroaching threat in representations of international events (Scholtz, 2019). The analysis clarifies how proximization contributes to discursive legitimation within DST's Inside and Outside Deictic Centers, (Vaara et al., 2024) and restructures the audience's interpretive space. The study further examines whether proximization markers appear in statistically meaningful patterns by applying a chi-square test to their distribution. This combined approach allows assessment of proximization as both a socio-cognitive operation (Liuzza et al., 2011) and an intentional discursive resource (Korkeamäki & Kohtamäki, 2020) rather than a coincidental textual feature. The research question asks *how the political speaker employs spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization—conceptually grounded in DST—to construct threat, legitimize policy action, and produce statistically verifiable distributional patterns*. This question positions the study within a unified analytical framework that links linguistic strategy, cognitive representation, and ideological effect. It underscores the need for proximization research to supplement qualitative interpretation with empirical corroboration, particularly when claims about persuasion and legitimisation rest on patterned discursive behaviour.

The study contributes to theoretical development by integrating DST with the spatial–temporal–axiological proximization framework, thereby clarifying how linguistic choices produce conceptual movement within political narratives and shape public perceptions of threat. Methodologically, it demonstrates how statistical procedures can substantiate claims about strategic patterning in political discourse (Moody & Eslami, 2020). The study also has applied relevance, as it illuminates how political actors construct security narratives and legitimize policy decisions in crisis contexts, including contemporary settings where identity-based and geopolitical anxieties are discursively amplified.

2. Theoretical Framework

Threat construction (Kovanic, 2021) in political communication has long been understood as a discursive process through which speakers reproduce and

legitimize power relations by framing particular actors as sources of risk and instability. This view draws from the foundational perspective in critical discourse studies (CDS) that discourse is not merely a vehicle for representing social reality but a constitutive practice that shapes public perception, social identities, and ideological alignments (Federico & Malka, 2023). Within crisis and security contexts, constructing an external threat (Risse, 2024) becomes a strategic act that enables political actors to guide collective emotions, foreground lines of moral division, and justify policy actions that might otherwise face contestation (Wu, 2023). The discursive dynamics of threat therefore operate at the intersection of language, cognition, and ideology, reaffirming the CDS commitment to examining how linguistic form and social power interact (Hassan, 2000).

Proximization theory offers a particularly productive lens for examining how threats are discursively manufactured and amplified (Wang, 2019). The central premise of proximization is that political speakers relocate geographically or temporally distant entities into the deictic proximity of the audience, thereby producing a sense of encroaching danger. Through this process, external actors—whether states, organizations, or abstract forces—are reframed as imminent and hostile. The rhetorical effect depends on shifting the boundaries between Self and Other so that “their” actions appear to intrude upon “our” space, values, or future. Prior studies have shown that such shifts often support ideological polarization, mobilization, and legitimation of preventive or defensive policies. Despite these contributions, proximization has primarily been examined as a strategy inferred from discourse rather than as a mechanism grounded in a broader cognitive architecture.

Discourse Space Theory (DST) provides the conceptual resources needed to anchor proximization within a more explicit socio-cognitive framework. As proposed by Chilton (Ahmed, 2021), DST models discourse processing through spatial, temporal, and axiological dimensions that structure how participants, events, and moral stances are positioned in relation to one another. These coordinates delineate an interpretive space in which Self and Other identities are negotiated (Georgakopoulou, 2008), and in which social actors are framed as aligned or antagonistic. Although proximization theory draws heavily on deictic movement across these coordinates, the relationship between the two frameworks has typically remained implicit. The absence of systematic integration has created conceptual ambiguity around how proximization maneuvers operate within a structured cognitive domain.

The present study addresses this gap by articulating proximization as the rhetorical enactment of DST’s spatial–temporal–axiological configuration. From this perspective, proximization markers are not simply linguistic devices but cues that reorganize the audience’s cognitive map of geopolitical developments. Spatial proximization positions external actors as intruding into the discourse space of the Self; temporal proximization compresses historical trajectories to project an urgent and accelerating threat; axiological proximization heightens moral contrast by framing the Other as violating core communal values (Zhang, 2023). These processes work together to move the discourse from narrating

events to prescribing action, thereby facilitating legitimation in contexts of political tension or perceived crisis.

Integrating proximization with DST also clarifies why examining linguistic patterns requires methodological precision. CDS has long advocated for methodological triangulation to substantiate claims about ideological meaning-making. In line with this tradition, mapping proximization markers across a dataset allows researchers to test whether threat construction is realized through systematic choices rather than incidental stylistic variation (Dinu & Uban, 2023). Distributional patterns, when statistically validated, provide evidence of deliberate strategic design, enhancing the explanatory strength of the analysis.

Bringing these theoretical strands together situates the present research within a unified framework that connects linguistic strategy, cognitive representation, and ideological effect (Priadi, 2025b). The integration of proximization theory with DST not only advances conceptual clarity but also provides the analytical foundation for investigating how political discourse (Priadi, 2025a) constructs the sense of an approaching threat, legitimizes policy responses, and organizes audience alignment to guide the formulation of the research question and the methodological procedures that follow.

Previous research has explored proximization as a rhetorical mechanism of political legitimation, yet empirical approaches remain uneven. Cap (2008, 2014) established proximization as a central strategy in legitimating military or security policies, framing distant actors as immediate threats. Wang (2019) analyzed President Xi Jinping's UN speech and found that spatial and temporal proximization sustain ideological solidarity by collapsing geopolitical distance. Ye and Chen (2023) extended the model to intelligence and propaganda texts. They highlighted how proximization reorganizes perception of national risk. However, most of these studies are qualitative, leaving the statistical regularity of proximization patterns unexplored.

Recent work has emphasized that proximization must be grounded in cognitive representation to explain its persuasive force. Chilton (2010) and Ke and Zou (2023) proposed Discourse Space Theory (DST) as a geometrical model that maps how participants and values are cognitively arranged within discourse. Cap (2017) and Salama (2022) further demonstrated that legitimation emerges when language reorganizes deictic space to reinforce moral alignment. Yet, few studies explicitly connect DST's triadic structure—spatial, temporal, axiological—to proximization as an operational process. The lack of this integration constitutes a conceptual gap this study addresses by showing how proximization can be operationalized within DST coordinates.

3. Methods

The study adopts a socio-cognitive discourse-analytic design (Gilbert, 2015) that brings proximization theory, Discourse Space Theory (DST), and distributional testing into a single analytical workflow. This design makes it possible to trace how the speech constructs an approaching threat and uses that construction to legitimate policy positions. Rather than treating

proximization as a lexical inventory, the analysis follows its operation as a deictic reconfiguration of space, time, and moral order.

3.1 Data and Analytical Unit

The dataset comprises the full transcript of a political speech sourced from the verified *Forbes Breaking News* channel (*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Addresses The United Nations General Assembly*, 2025). The recording offers an intact sequential organization and rhetorical contour, which are essential for capturing proximization as cumulative movement across discourse. The transcript was segmented into clause-level units because proximization operates through predicational choices that re-anchor social actors within DST's coordinates. Each clause thus constitutes a discrete analytical move in the broader argumentative trajectory.

3.2 Coding and Categorization

Coding identifies three proximization types—spatial, temporal, axiological—defined functionally rather than lexically. A clause was coded as spatial when it reconfigured distance, intrusion, or boundary pressure; as temporal when it compressed time, foregrounded imminence, or invoked accelerating dynamics; and as axiological when it intensified moral differentiation or framed the antagonist as violating normative orders. These categories directly operationalize DST's three axes and correspond to distinct modes of threat construction and policy legitimation. A single dominant category was assigned per clause to maintain analytic independence and permit statistical testing.

3.3 Reliability and Interpretive Calibration

Two trained coders independently applied the scheme. Initial disagreements were addressed through reflexive comparison of analytic warrants, ensuring that category decisions tracked proximizing functions rather than surface forms. Cohen's Kappa was used to confirm reliability, and the consolidated version of the dataset reflects a shared interpretive grounding anchored in proximization theory and socio-cognitive discourse analysis.

3.4 DST-Based Mapping

For each coded clause, DST mapping reconstructs how the discourse repositions Self and Other through deictic movement. The procedure attends to: (a) the coordinate invoked (spatial / temporal / axiological), (b) the vector of movement toward the deictic center, and (c) the cumulative trajectory through which threat is intensified. This mapping reveals how proximization sequences recalibrate perceived risk, rendering certain policy stances not merely plausible but necessary and normatively justified. The mapping therefore operates as the bridge between micro-level linguistic cues and macro-level legitimation effects.

3.5 Legitimation Layer

The analysis incorporates legitimation as a co-occurring discursive function. Clauses were examined for how proximization intersects with authorization, moral evaluation, or rationalization. The goal is not to treat legitimation as a separate module but to show how proximization provides the cognitive preconditions for justifying policy proposals. This approach aligns with Discourse & Society's emphasis on linking linguistic patterning to ideological consequences and political positioning.

3.6 Distributional Analysis

A chi-square test was applied to evaluate whether the distribution of proximization categories diverges from randomness. Rather than serving a generalizing function, statistical significance here demonstrates patterned rhetorical design: the speech does not merely contain proximization but organizes it strategically across its progression. Significant deviation from the null hypothesis strengthens the claim that proximization works as a deliberate mechanism of threat construction and policy legitimation rather than an incidental stylistic tendency.

4. Findings

The analysis shows that proximization is not dispersed randomly across the speech but unfolds as a patterned rhetorical sequence that shifts the out-group progressively toward the in-group's cognitive center. Spatial, temporal, and axiological vectors work in concert, with each dimension contributing a distinct pressure on how the audience is encouraged to perceive threat, vulnerability, and policy necessity.

4.1 Spatial Proximization, Temporal Proximization, and Axiological Proximization

Spatial proximization appears as an early and persistent move in the speech, with 48 instances portraying antagonistic actors as breaching or moving toward the in-group's protected domain. Clauses such as " Hamas terrorists stormed into Israel" and " Iran is tightening a noose of death around our throats" mark a continuous narrowing of spatial distance. These formulations do more than describe events; they reorder the discourse space so that multiple out-group actors converge toward the same threatened center. The clustering of spatial cues immediately before policy claims suggests that spatial compression is used to establish the physical plausibility of imminent harm—a premise that later segments build upon.

Temporal proximization ($n = 36$) reinforces this spatial movement by collapsing temporal boundaries. Expressions like " again and again," " at this moment," and the invocation of historical trauma (" the worst attack on Jews since the Holocaust") establish a continuity between past violations and present threat. Through this compression, the speech recasts the situation as one in which delay is intolerable and response is time-bound. The temporal trajectory

becomes sharper in passages preceding explicit political proposals, indicating that urgency is deliberately intensified as the justification sequence develops.

Axiological proximization emerges as the most dominant vector ($n = 52$) and provides the moral architecture through which threat becomes not merely strategic but civilizational. Terms such as “monsters,” “evil,” and “barbarism” present the out-group as fundamentally transgressive, collapsing moral distance and framing the conflict as a defense of universal norms. Axiological escalation is especially concentrated in narrative segments recounting violence against civilians, where moral condemnation aligns the in-group with notions of protection, survival, and virtue. This dimension transforms the spatial–temporal movement into an ethical mandate and thereby establishes the normative rationale for action.

4.2 Integrated DST–Proximization Dynamics

When mapped through DST, the three proximization types reveal a convergent movement from the Outer Deictic Center toward the Inside Deictic Center. Spatial markers introduce directional encroachment; temporal markers accelerate its pace; axiological markers attribute moral weight to its consequences. The cumulative effect is a multi-axis threat trajectory that culminates in boundary-crossing events, such as the shift from “launching missiles” to “terrorizing our citizens,” where external hostility is discursively relocated into the moral and physical core of the in-group. This integrated movement shows that proximization is not only a framing device but the scaffolding through which the speech organizes its persuasive logic.

The multi-vector proximization trajectory emerging from the analysis is summarized in Figure 1. The diagram synthesizes the spatial, temporal, and axiological movements observed in the data and visualizes how these vectors jointly shift the antagonistic actors from the ODC toward the IDC. It reflects the cumulative pattern identified in the DST mapping procedure and illustrates the integrated threat trajectory that underpins the subsequent legitimization moves.

DST–Proximization Model of Threat Construction

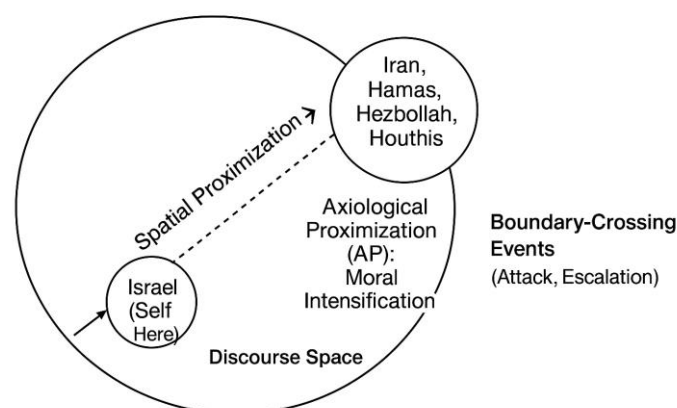


Figure 1 presents the DST–Proximization model that informs the analytical procedures used in the subsequent sections

Figure 1 illustrates the DST–proximization configuration derived from the findings. Spatial (SP), temporal (TP), and axiological (AP) proximization project antagonistic out-groups (Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis) from the Outer Deictic Center (ODC) toward the Inside Deictic Center (IDC), where “Israel/Self” is positioned. Solid, dashed, and curved arrows indicate the three vectors of proximization, each contributing to deictic contraction and producing boundary-crossing interpretations. This configuration visually represents how the speech collapses distance, compresses time, and heightens moral contrast to construct an imminent and morally charged threat.

4.3 Proximization, Legitimation, and Distributional Evidence

The proximization sequence aligns closely with legitimation moves. As spatial and temporal compression foreground vulnerability and urgency, axiological intensification constructs resistance as obligatory rather than optional. Policy proposals such as “Israel must finish the job” appear immediately after dense proximization clusters, suggesting that the legitimacy of proposed action depends on the cognitive and emotional landscape generated by SP–TP–AP escalation. Proximization thus functions as the precondition for authorization, moral evaluation, and rationalization, integrating cognitive pressure with political intent.

To empirically substantiate the qualitative interpretation, all clauses in the dataset were coded according to their dominant proximization type—spatial, temporal, or axiological—based on their discursive function within the DST framework. This classification enables systematic observation of how the speech organizes the perception of threat across deictic dimensions. The resulting distribution, summarized in Table 1, illustrates the frequency of each proximization category and represents linguistic realizations and their corresponding cognitive effects. This tabular presentation provides a concise overview of how proximization operates as a patterned mechanism of ideological persuasion rather than a random stylistic feature.

Table 1.
Frequency and Examples of Proximization Markers in the Dataset

Proximization Type	Freq	Representative Clause	Cognitive Effect (DST Axis)
Spatial (SP)	48	“Hamas terrorists stormed into Israel”; “Iran is tightening a noose of death around our throats.”	Collapses geopolitical distance; constructs imminent encroachment toward the Self.
Temporal (TP)	36	“Again and again,” “At this moment,” “The worst attack since the Holocaust.”	Compresses historical and present timelines to evoke urgency and inevitability.
Axiological (AP)	52	“Monsters,” “Evil,” “Barbarism.”	Intensifies moral contrast; aligns Self with universal virtue against the Other’s immorality.

Total Clauses Analyzed: 136

Chi-square result: $\chi^2(2) = 25.47, p < .001$

The distribution in Table 1 reveals that proximization markers are not evenly dispersed but strategically concentrated to guide cognitive alignment. The dominance of axiological proximization (n = 52) indicates that moral framing functions as the central persuasive vector in constructing the sense of political urgency and legitimacy. Spatial proximization (n = 48) provides the experiential grounding by visualizing physical encroachment, while temporal proximization (n = 36) introduces narrative acceleration that frames response as temporally imperative. The convergence of these three dimensions demonstrates how the discourse systematically contracts symbolic distance, accelerates the perception of threat, and amplifies moral polarization. Statistical confirmation of this non-random pattern ($\chi^2(2) = 25.47, p < .001$) further validates proximization as a deliberate cognitive mechanism of ideological management rather than a coincidental rhetorical feature.

5. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that proximization in the speech functions not merely as a linguistic pattern but as an ideological operation that organizes social cognition. Spatial, temporal, and axiological cues interact to construct a coherent threat scenario in which geopolitical events are mapped onto the audience's immediate experiential domain. This discursive configuration aligns with the logic of Chilton's Deictic Space Theory (DST), where shifts in deictic coordinates reorient the audience's position toward an approaching danger. The clustering of proximization markers confirms that these shifts are not incidental; rather, they are strategically patterned to contract protective distance, accelerate the perception of political time, and intensify moral boundaries. Statistical asymmetries strengthen this interpretation by showing that the speaker systematically privileges temporal and axiological frames, which are the most effective vectors for producing urgency and moral clarity.

These proximization dynamics, however, cannot be separated from broader processes of ideological management. Following van Dijk's account of social cognition (Van Dijk, 1993), the speech works to stabilize an in-group epistemic framework in which the Self is constructed as vulnerable yet morally responsible, while the Other is portrayed as intrusive, escalating, and ethically corrupt. Spatial contraction simplifies geopolitical complexity by translating international conflict into personal exposure to harm. Temporal acceleration naturalizes the speaker's claim that action is not simply necessary but unavoidable. Axiological intensification provides the evaluative foundation for legitimizing political intervention. Together, these moves reproduce the ideological square that accentuates the Self's virtues while amplifying the Other's transgressions. What appears as a narrative of security is therefore better understood as a discursive attempt to guide public reasoning through structured moral and cognitive hierarchies.

The speech also draws heavily on strategies of historical recontextualization, which resonates with Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (Ruth Wodak (ed), 2005; Wodak & Kendall, 2007). Past conflicts, humanitarian suffering, and episodes of aggression are selectively brought into

the present to energize topoi of danger, responsibility, and urgency. These references do not merely provide background; they function as argumentative warrants that frame current events as predictable extensions of earlier hostilities. By reactivating memory in this way, the speaker constructs temporal continuity between past harms and present risks, reinforcing the sense that the threat is both enduring and morally consequential. This interdiscursive layering strengthens proximization because it anchors the speaker's claims in historically legitimized narratives that appear self-evident and authoritative.

A key implication of these patterns is the normalization of a political environment structured around crisis. Proximization makes threat appear imminent, coherent, and ethically unambiguous, which can restrict the discursive space available for alternative interpretations. The compression of time and space limits deliberative possibilities by positioning dissent as irresponsible or dangerous. Moreover, the moral intensification inherent in axiological proximization risks producing forms of symbolic marginalization, particularly when groups are repeatedly positioned as inherently cruel or morally degraded. In this sense, proximization operates as a technique of securitization: it produces the cognitive and emotional conditions through which exceptional political measures can be justified to the public.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence offers further methodological insight. The chi-square results show that the distribution of proximization markers is meaningfully uneven, indicating a strategic orchestration of rhetorical cues rather than random stylistic preference. This pattern reinforces the argument that proximization is best understood as a structured discursive mechanism embedded in political persuasion. Frequency distributions help uncover how certain linguistic resources are foregrounded to intensify threat perception and moral polarization. Such corpus-informed CDA demonstrates that proximization is observable not only as a cognitive and ideological construct but also as a quantifiable textual pattern that reveals intentionality.

The findings raise broader questions about how proximization functions in different national contexts. Similar patterns appear in Indonesian political discourse, especially in narratives of ideological infiltration, extremism, and national security. The recurrence of spatial, temporal, and axiological compression across diverse settings suggests that proximization has become a transnational rhetorical resource for managing public anxiety. Yet its local manifestations depend on culturally specific fears and political histories. This variability underscores the need for reflexive awareness regarding the researcher's interpretive position—particularly when applying proximization theory beyond Euro-American contexts—since the meaning of threat, urgency, and moral boundary-making is always socially situated.

6. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that proximization functions as the central mechanism through which the speech constructs a coherent, immediate, and morally charged threat. Spatial contraction, temporal acceleration, and

axiological intensification converge to reposition distant geopolitical actors within the speaker's deictic center, generating a cognitive environment where vulnerability appears imminent and resistance becomes obligatory. The integration of DST with the spatial–temporal–axiological model clarifies how these linguistic operations coordinate ideological framing by collapsing distance, compressing time, and heightening moral contrast. The statistical distribution of markers reinforces this interpretation by showing a non-random pattern that reflects deliberate rhetorical design.

These findings advance critical discourse research by illustrating how proximization interacts with broader strategies of historical recontextualization and ideological management, thereby shaping public reasoning under conditions of perceived crisis. While the focus on a single speech limits generalizability, the methodological synthesis—combining DST mapping, qualitative coding, and chi-square validation—offers a transferable framework for examining how threat discourse operates across political contexts. Future research can extend this approach to explore how proximization circulates transnationally and contributes to the normalization of security-driven interpretations of political action.

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