Intergovernmental Diplomacy and Consensus Rhetoric in United Nations Official Discourse

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Abstract: Language plays a central role in multilateral diplomacy, particularly within the institutional framework of the United Nations (UN), where decision-making is strongly oriented toward consensus. This article examines the rhetorical and pragmatic mechanisms through which consensus is constructed in UN official discourse. Drawing on theories of politeness, hedging, modality, strategic ambiguity, and speech act theory, the study analyzes how linguistic strategies such as indirectness, impersonality, passive constructions, euphemism, and modal expressions function to minimize conflict and facilitate agreement among sovereign states. The findings demonstrate that UN diplomatic language systematically avoids overt confrontation in favor of generalized, cooperative formulations that enable divergent political positions to coexist within a shared textual framework. The article argues that consensus in UN discourse is not merely a political outcome but a linguistically mediated process shaped by carefully calibrated rhetorical choices.

Keywords: United Nations discourse, diplomatic language, consensus rhetoric, politeness theory, strategic ambiguity.

Introduction

In the multilateral forums of the United Nations, language functions as both a means of negotiation and a tool of persuasion. Structurally, UN discourse prioritizes consensus—that is, collective agreement—over majority voting. This requirement of consensus permeates all levels of UN communication, ranging from official resolutions and General Assembly debates to public statements and mediation negotiations. As Berridge notes, "consensus decision-making" at the UN seeks the consent of all participants when all parties agree to treat decisions adopted in this manner as if they were unanimous.[30] Consequently, in practice, UN language tends to avoid open confrontation and instead develops a generalized, compromise-oriented tone.

The rhetoric of UN diplomacy is carefully crafted to create a minimal common denominator on sensitive issues where states can "meet halfway." By examining the theoretical and sociopragmatic foundations of rhetorical strategy, this study analyzes how mitigation and indirectness, impersonal constructions, deliberate ambiguity, euphemistic language, nuanced modality, and cooperative speech acts work together to construct consensus in multilateral contexts.Politeness and Caution in Diplomatic Negotiations UN discourse is fundamentally grounded in politeness theory, which posits that speakers mitigate face-threatening acts in order to maintain cooperation. Classical politeness theories (Brown & Levinson[31]; Leech[32]) have long emphasized that in formal or institutional settings, speakers tend to soften obligations. In diplomatic discourse, hedging expressions and indirect formulations are standard devices. Hedging expressions—such as lexical qualifiers (perhaps, some, a number of, possibly) or epistemic modals (may, might, could)—allow speakers to express propositions tentatively,

leaving room for disagreement or reinterpretation. Lak off initially described hedges as markers of vagueness or politeness; in diplomacy, however, they serve the dual purpose of face preservation and flexibility. Diplomats may "communicate through hedging—avoiding direct goals and employing deliberately vague language."[33] Gomes de Matos explicitly identifies this as a diplomatic norm: negotiators often "avoid directness" and rely on vagueness to maintain positive relations.[34] More concretely, a delegate may say "we may consider cooperation" instead of "we will cooperate," or use an impersonal passive ("it is believed that…") rather than an explicit assertion in order to soften potential resistance.

In multilateral negotiations, hedging protects the negative face of each state—the desire to avoid binding commitments—and keeps final decisions open. Without such linguistic protection, unilateral actions risk rejection. Scholars of politeness emphasize that the greater the social distance or power imbalance, the greater the need for indirectness. In the UN context, where sovereign states are formally equal, this frequently results in the use of negative politeness strategies in directive discourse. Doncheva-Navratilova demonstrates that explicit performative verbs in UN resolutions and statements (such as calls upon, invites, or requests) are often combined with hedging expressions and modal verbs to weaken their force.[35]

Negative politeness strategies—such as conditional expressions ("we would appreciate it if…") and interrogative directives—are common. For example, rather than issuing a direct command, a delegation may state: "Member States are requested to cooperate with ongoing efforts." Such cautious formulations advance diplomatic objectives while respecting the autonomy of recipients. Qualitative analyses of UN official discourse confirm this pattern and explain the widespread use of modal verbs as expressions of probability rather than certainty. Modal verbs such as may, might, and could are preferred over direct assertions. This usage is not merely stylistic but functional: by embedding uncertainty, speakers preserve negotiating space.

Qualifiers such as to a certain extent or in some cases are deliberately added to avoid overgeneralization, creating an overall impression of respect and impartiality. Even praise and support in UN speeches are expressed through moderated formulations such as strongly supports or looks forward with hope rather than absolute endorsement.[36] In sum, hedging in diplomatic language functions as a politeness strategy that shields negotiators from conflict and facilitates agreement by making proposals more acceptable to all parties.

Passive, Abstract, and Impersonal Constructions The preference for passive and impersonal constructions in UN discourse is closely linked to hedging through modality. By framing statements in the passive voice or omitting the agent, speakers deflect attention from individual responsibility. This is crucial for mitigating blame and reducing controversy in the pursuit of consensus. For example, instead of stating "We condemn action X," an ambassador may say "Action X is considered a violation" or "It has been noted that action X contravenes…". Such formulations depersonalize judgment and distribute responsibility across the organization as a whole.

Similarly, generalized subjects ("Member States note…", "It is necessary that…") avoid singling out specific actors. Analysts at DiploFoundation highlight this tendency by identifying the use of active or passive constructions as a key factor in strengthening or softening rhetorical impact.[37] In practice, official UN documents are replete with nominalizations and agentless clauses, lending texts an appearance of objectivity and institutional authority. This impersonal style contributes to consensus-building by minimizing conflict. When no specific government is identified as the agent, language is perceived as institutional or collective rather than partisan. Such constructions prevent participants from feeling directly blamed or targeted. Linguists regard these structures as conventional politeness strategies, as passive forms soften directive force.[38] For instance, instead of saying "France vetoed the resolution," one may state "the draft resolution was not adopted," thereby expressing dissent without attributing it to a particular country. In this way, UN diplomacy maintains neutrality and shared purpose by abstracting language and distributing responsibility across the international community.

Strategic Ambiguity and Vagueness Perhaps the most characteristic feature of multilateral diplomacy is strategic ambiguity. When achieving consensus is paramount, deliberate vagueness can serve as a powerful instrument. Drazen Pehar vividly illustrates how mediators use ambiguous language to overcome deadlock. He argues that when two parties hold "strong and opposing interests" and neither is willing to retreat, negotiators may introduce clauses that allow for "at least two different interpretations."[39]

In practice, this involves crafting sentences acceptable to both sides yet interpretable in different ways. As Pehar explains, such ambiguity allows parties to preserve their own visions of how matters should proceed while agreeing on a common text. In effect, ambiguity produces an artificial "consensus" text that all sides can sign while maintaining divergent interpretations. This is not deception but a tactical mechanism for moving negotiations forward.Similarly, Norman Scott argues that diplomatic actors oscillate between striving for precision—to secure favorable terms—and embracing ambiguity to alleviate collective concerns.[40] From this perspective, ambiguity is frequently a deliberate feature of UN agreements, enabling a "simulation of compromise" in which each party quietly preserves its position.[41] Although critics contend that ambiguous agreements merely postpone conflict, Pehar acknowledges that even temporary détente may be valuable when preventing breakdown is essential.From a linguistic standpoint, polysemy represents a macro-level form of hedging that complements modal expressions at the micro level. Diplomats recognize that language is never fully neutral; thus, they craft formulations sufficiently vague to prevent any party from perceiving direct confrontation. Positive but indeterminate verbs such as strengthen, support, and address are commonly used in treaties, whereas action-oriented verbs or precise figures are avoided. As Orwell warned in Politics and the English Language, political language often relies on "euphemism, question-begging, and sheer vagueness."[42] In UN consensus politics, such vagueness is not accidental but constitutes the rhetorical foundation of compromise.

Euphemism and Face Preservation

Building on Orwell's critique, it becomes evident that euphemism is widespread in UN rhetoric. Diplomats frequently mask contentious realities with neutral or positively connoted expressions. Military invasion may be referred to as peacekeeping, sanctions as restrictive measures, and civilian casualties as collateral damage or, in UN terminology, unintended consequences. These lexical choices serve two purposes: they reduce emotional and moral weight and allow states to acknowledge problems without explicitly admitting fault.

By concealing brutality or conflict, language mitigates potential offense and makes agreements acceptable to a wider range of actors. Institutional analysts emphasize that such euphemisms serve practical objectives. In UN usage, expressions such as complex situations, situations of concern, or actions contrary to international law function to soften references to war, crisis, or aggression.[44] Euphemism thus operates as a face-saving device for all parties: victims feel their suffering is acknowledged without sensationalism, perpetrators are not fully condemned, and mediators can sustain dialogue.

This strategy aligns with frequent appeals to solidarity and empathy. Positive collocations—our shared goals, common challenges, dialogue and cooperation—frame negotiations as collective endeavors. Even severe problems are presented as shared responsibilities or opportunities. As a result, the semantic field of UN discourse is carefully sanitized: contentious terms are softened or erased, conflict is circumvented, and unpleasant realities are rendered in institutional language. In this way, UN rhetoric manages linguistic risk by ensuring public acceptance of texts without severe political repercussions.

Diplomatic Modality and Tone

The grammatical encoding of necessity, obligation, and probability through modality is closely intertwined with hedging and euphemism. In diplomatic discourse, modality serves as a subtle indicator of how strongly a proposal is advanced. As noted by Armenian linguists, modal verbs

in UN statements often express nuanced shades of possibility or obligation. Words such as should, may, would, and might are strategically employed.

A statement such as "Member States should take action" conveys obligation in a polite manner, whereas "Member States may wish to consider action" suggests recommendation rather than demand. Martirosyan argues that such modal choices allow negotiators to avoid blunt rejection and instead articulate positions more softly.[45] Deontic modals regulate degrees of obligation, while epistemic modals signal confidence or uncertainty. In consensus-driven environments, epistemic modality is particularly prevalent, distancing speakers from categorical claims.

Absolute modals such as must or certainly are rare, as they risk entrenching positions and undermining compromise. Even when necessity is expressed, it is often embedded in conditional or future-oriented constructions. Diplomatic modality thus functions as a spectrum of commitment, enabling speakers to test reactions and preserve interpretive flexibility. From a systemic-functional perspective, these modal variations act as pragmatic signals aligned with the UN's ethos of collective restraint. The consistent use of formal and ceremonial language (Your Excellencies, distinguished delegates, we have taken note) further reinforces the neutrality and solemnity expected of diplomatic consensus.[48]

Speech Acts Shaping Consensus

Underlying all of the above are the speech acts that structure interaction at the UN. Drawing on speech act theory (Austin[49]; Searle[50]), UN rhetoric employs representative, directive, commissive, and expressive acts in carefully calibrated ways to promote agreement. In practice, collective UN documents predominantly feature declarations ("The General Assembly decides"), commitments ("Member States undertake to…"), assurances ("The Assembly affirms"), and soft directives ("we encourage, invite, request"). Explicit commands or threats are exceedingly rare.Studies of UN treaties reveal that directive acts are infrequent, whereas commissive acts predominate, reflecting the consensus-based nature of UN texts. Agreements and resolutions are designed to bind parties collectively rather than coerce minorities. The frequent use of the collective pronoun we rhetorically constructs unity, transforming all participants into stakeholders. Even when views diverge, this pronoun creates an illusion of coherence.[51]

Drafting practices aim to produce language that sounds unanimous, resulting in formulaic expressions such as Taking into account or Expressing its determination. This aligns with Brown and Levinson's notion of positive politeness emphasizing group solidarity. Analyses of UNESCO resolutions demonstrate that even performative verbs are selected with politeness in mind, with positive evaluative expressions embedded in preambles and operative clauses.[52] For example, a draft may begin with "Welcoming the efforts of all parties" before proceeding to requests or calls for action. Ultimately, the purpose of these speech acts is to achieve consensus. Frequent references to shared responsibility, universal values, and our collective interest function as expressive acts that cultivate a sense of "we-ness." By repeatedly invoking abstract ideals such as peace, security, and development, or widely accepted commitments like the UN Charter and the Sustainable Development Goals, speakers unite participants around common objectives. Even disagreement is framed constructively, for instance: "We regret that consensus has not been reached on this issue, yet we reaffirm our shared goal…".

In short, in UN discourse, consensus formation depends less on what is said than on how it is said. Every speech act is carefully calibrated to maximize acceptability. As Berridge observes, UN consensus often involves setting aside the fact of substantive disagreement while presenting decisions as if they were unanimous.[53] Consensus rhetoric thus resembles negotiations rearticulated through language—a fusion of face-saving politeness, strategic ambiguity, and collective

Conclusion

This article has shown that consensus in United Nations diplomacy is fundamentally a linguistic achievement. Through politeness strategies, hedging, impersonal constructions, strategic

ambiguity, euphemism, calibrated modality, and cooperative speech acts, UN discourse transforms political disagreement into institutionally acceptable consensus. What matters is often not what is said, but how it is said. As Berridge observes, UN consensus frequently involves setting aside the absence of substantive agreement while presenting decisions as if they were unanimous. In this sense, consensus rhetoric represents a ritualized form of negotiation, where language functions as the primary mechanism for managing face, preserving relations, and sustaining multilateral cooperation.uctures that ritualize agreement.

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