Constructing Moral Legitimacy through Empathic and Inferential Strategies in Political Discourse toward a Cognitive–Pragmatic Model of Diplomatic Persuasion

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates President Prabowo Subianto's 2025 address to the United Nations General Assembly through the integrated framework of Cognitive Pragmatics and Relevance Theory. It explores how persuasion in diplomatic discourse operates as a distributed cognitive process rather than a mere rhetorical performance. The analysis combines qualitative pragmatic interpretation with corpus-assisted evidence using AntConc to identify patterns of attention, inference, and empathy in the speech. Findings reveal that ostensive cues function as attentional scaffolds directing the audience's cognitive focus, while inferential mechanisms co-construct moral legitimacy through shared reasoning. Empathy, manifested lexically and prosodically, emerges as a relevance amplifier that fuses affective alignment with inferential cooperation. Quantitative corpus results particularly the high frequency of moral and relational lexemes such as peace, justice, humanity, and together confirm the centrality of moral cognition in persuasive framing. The study extends Relevance Theory by proposing empathy as an epistemic variable mediating the affective–inferential continuum of meaning. It concludes that political persuasion, especially within Global South diplomacy, functions as a cognitive negotiation of shared moral relevance, where understanding and empathy become sources of communicative authority. This research thus contributes to the theoretical expansion of Relevance Theory, the methodological integration of corpus pragmatics, and the empirical understanding of moral cognition in global political communication.

1. Introduction

In contemporary international relations, political communication functions not merely as the transmission of policy but as a form of cognitive negotiation between states and global

publics [1]. When national leaders address the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), their speeches operate as ostensive-inferential acts that seek to establish joint attention and shared understanding across culturally diverse audiences. Such addresses, while ostensibly formal and diplomatic, engage complex pragmatic mechanisms through which meaning is inferred rather than stated. Within this communicative space, every utterance may be interpreted as an attempt to achieve optimal relevance, that is, the greatest cognitive effect for the least interpretative effort, as theorised by Sperber and Wilson [2]. In this regard, political discourse becomes a site where cognition, emotion, and legitimacy intersect.

President Prabowo Subianto's 2025 address to the UNGA represents what may be viewed as a strategic act of moral positioning within the Global South narrative. Rather than foregrounding confrontation or ideological rivalry, the speech constructs Indonesia's postcolonial experience as a moral resource for global solidarity [3]. Through appeals to peace, justice, and human dignity, it articulates a vision of international order grounded in empathy and shared historical consciousness. This rhetorical stance [4] warrants closer attention, for it exemplifies how national identity may be recontextualised as a universal claim to fairness. It thus provides a compelling case for examining how pragmatic and cognitive mechanisms mediate persuasive intent within multilateral diplomacy.

Existing scholarship on political discourse has contributed substantially to our understanding of how language encodes power and ideology [5] and how rhetorical devices shape the ethos of leadership. Nevertheless, these approaches have tended to privilege surface-level structures of discourse lexis, metaphor, and argumentation over the inferential processes through which audiences construct meaning. Within the field of pragmatics, Relevance Theory has illuminated how speakers and hearers coordinate mental representations [6] through ostensive stimuli [7]. Yet its application to institutional and cross-cultural political communication remains

[1] Andrea Caputo, 'A Literature Review of Cognitive Biases in Negotiation Processes', *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 2013 <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-08-2012-0064>; Christopher A. Stevens and others, 'Using Cognitive Agents to Train Negotiation Skills', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9.FEB (2018) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00154>.

[2] Rui Hong, 'The Analysis of Cold Jokes Based on Relevance Theory', *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 9.2 (2019) <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0902.12>; Raymond W. Gibbs and Gregory A. Bryant, 'Striving for Optimal Relevance When Answering Questions', *Cognition*, 106.1 (2008) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2007.02.008>; Diana Mazzarella, '"Optimal Relevance" as a Pragmatic Criterion: The Role of Epistemic Vigilance', *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 25 (2013).

[3] Lee Michael Shults, 'Avoiding Parasitical Uses of Global Solidarity', *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 6 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2024.1305952>.

[4] Yingliang Liu, Xuechen Hu, and Jiaying Liu, 'A Corpus-Based Study on Chinese and American Students' Rhetorical Moves and Stance Features in Dissertation Abstracts', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1004744>.

[5] Maha Salah Eldien Mohamed Hamed, 'Power and Ideology in Reality Tv: A Critical Contrastive Approach to English Cooking Competition Tv Programs and Their Arabic Replications', *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 2020 <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.20.2.3>; Garret Olberding, 'Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China. Edited by Yuri Pines, Paul R. Goldin, and Martin Kern', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 138.2 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.7817/jameroriesoci.138.2.0439>.

[6] Marek Jakubiec, 'Legal Concepts as Mental Representations', *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 35.5 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-021-09853-7>; Irina A. Kibalchenko and Tatiana V. Eksakusto, 'Mental Representations as The Students' Academic Success Predictor', *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education*, 11.1 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.23947/2334-8496-2023-11-1-51-62>.

[7] Constant Bonard, 'Beyond Ostension: Introducing the Expressive Principle of Relevance', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 187 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.10.024>; Marina Terkourafi, 'Pragmatics as an Interdisciplinary Field', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 179 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.04.015>.

limited. It is therefore plausible that a cognitive-pragmatic perspective can yield fresh insight into how diplomatic persuasion is achieved through relevance optimisation and empathic resonance.

This study accordingly examines President Prabowo Subianto's UNGA speech through the integrated framework of Cognitive Pragmatics and Relevance Theory. It seeks to identify how linguistic and paralinguistic strategies function as cognitive cues that direct the audience's inferential processes, and how these mechanisms contribute to the construction of moral legitimacy. The analysis also explores how empathy, as both an emotional and inferential dimension, enhances the perceived sincerity and credibility of the speaker. Taken together, these elements illuminate the mental architecture of political persuasion in an intercultural setting.

The inquiry is guided by three research questions: 1. In what ways are ostensive cues employed to manage the audience's cognitive attention? 2. How do inferential mechanisms contribute to the construction of moral legitimacy and shared identity? 3. How does empathy interact with relevance to strengthen the persuasive force of the speech?

To pursue these questions, the paper adopts a qualitative cognitive-pragmatic approach [8], integrating theoretical insights from Relevance Theory, Cognitive Pragmatics, and political discourse cognition. The analysis aims to bridge the gap between linguistic evidence and mental representation, thereby reframing political communication as an inherently cognitive enterprise rather than a purely rhetorical one. Addressing within the communicative practices of the Global South, the study argues that empathy and moral reasoning serve as pivotal strategies for negotiating shared meaning across asymmetrical global relations [9].

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical foundations underpinning the study, with emphasis on the cognitive principles of ostension, inference, and empathy. Section 3 describes the methodological procedures employed to operationalise these constructs within discourse analysis. Section 4 presents a detailed analysis of selected segments from the speech, demonstrating how relevance is optimised through linguistic and pragmatic choices. Finally, Section 5 synthesises the findings and discusses their broader implications for the study of political communication and pragmatic theory.

2. Theoretical Framework

Cognitive Pragmatics offers a conceptual bridge between linguistic expression and the inferential processes that sustain human communication [10]. It conceives of discourse not as the mechanical exchange of information but as a dynamic coordination of mental states, intentions, and contextual assumptions. Within political settings where speech acts carry institutional authority and ideological consequence, this perspective enables the examination of how meaning emerges through reciprocal mind-reading and pragmatic inference. In contrast to structural approaches that focus on what is said, Cognitive Pragmatics foregrounds how it is understood, thereby situating political persuasion within the domain of cognitive coordination.

[8] Arum Priadi, 'Linguistic Manipulation in Gendered Political Campaigns : A Pragmatic Analysis of Suggestion in the Discourse of Female Leadership in Indonesia', 1.1 (2025), 67–89.

[9] Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk and Vilde Schanke Sundet, 'Global Platforms and Asymmetrical Power: Industry Dynamics and Opportunities for Policy Change', *New Media and Society*, 25.8 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211029662>.

[10] Hamid Mowlana, 'On Human Communication', *Javnost*, 25.1–2 (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1418978>.

Relevance Theory refines this perspective by defining communication as an ostensive–inferential process in which speakers guide the audience's attention towards the intended set of contextual assumptions. The principle of optimal relevance implies that interlocutors seek the highest cognitive payoff for the least interpretive effort. When applied to diplomatic discourse, this principle clarifies how a speaker adjusts informational density, implicature, and tone to accommodate heterogeneous global audiences. In this inferential environment, persuasion becomes an act of cognitive calibration rather than mere rhetorical display.

Within this theoretical frame, empathy may be reinterpreted not solely as an affective trait but as a cognitive mechanism facilitating alignment between speaker and hearer. Empathic resonance enables the reconstruction of the audience's mental states, thus enhancing relevance through shared emotional inference. In political communication, such empathy functions as both epistemic access and moral positioning, it allows the speaker to construct common ground across ideological and cultural distance. This study therefore extends Relevance Theory by incorporating cognitive empathy as a pragmatic variable that mediates inferential convergence within multilateral diplomacy.

Scholar such as Chilton [11] has demonstrated that political language operates through spatial, moral, and cognitive proximisation—the discursive relocation of threat, virtue, or solidarity within the audience's perceptual field. Building on this insight, the present framework views proximisation as an instrument of relevance management: a linguistic means of making certain moral or geopolitical assumptions cognitively accessible. Through this lens, Prabowo Subianto's UNGA address can be examined as an inferentially guided performance of empathy, wherein moral propositions are structured to maximise interpretive accessibility while minimising cognitive resistance.

This theoretical synthesis advances three interdependent propositions. First, meaning in political discourse is achieved through ostensive–inferential coordination rather than explicit declaration. Second, empathy operates as a pragmatic device that enhances relevance and moral alignment. Third, the effectiveness of international rhetoric depends on how efficiently these mechanisms are balanced within the cognitive environment of a plural audience. Articulating this triadic model, the study contributes to the expanding interface between Cognitive Pragmatics and political communication, positioning diplomatic discourse as a form of cognitive diplomacy a domain where persuasion is negotiated through shared attention and moral inference.

3. Research Method

3.1. Data Source and Context

The primary data consist of the official transcript of President Prabowo Subianto's address at the 80th United Nations General Assembly, delivered on 23 September 2025 in New York. The video source was obtained from the official YouTube channel of KOMPASTV ("Presiden Prabowo menyampaikan pidatonya di Sidang Ke-80 Majelis Umum PBB," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9T0573NuA8)[12]. The speech, lasting approximately 15 minutes, was manually transcribed and verified for lexical accuracy and prosodic integrity. The corpus contains 3,427 words and represents a single, cohesive rhetorical event aimed at a global diplomatic audience.

[11] Jeremy Munday, 'Engagement and Graduation Resources as Markers of Translator/Interpreter Positioning', *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies*, 27.3 (2015) <https://doi.org/10.1075/target.27.3.05mun>.

[12] 'Presiden Prabowo Menyampaikan Pidatonya Di Sidang Ke-80 Majelis Umum Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa, Selasa (23/9/2025).', 2025.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The analysis combines Cognitive Pragmatics and Relevance Theory to examine the inferential and empathic dimensions of persuasion. Three cognitive–pragmatic parameters guided the inquiry:

1. Ostensive–Inferential Design – cues that manage audience attention (RQ1),
2. Moral Inferencing and Legitimacy – mechanisms constructing shared identity (RQ2),
3. Empathy and Affective Relevance – emotional scaffolding of persuasion (RQ3).

These dimensions were operationalised through a corpus-assisted analysis that integrates quantitative frequency and collocation data with qualitative inferential interpretation.

3.3. Corpus Processing and AntConc Procedures

The transcript was converted into plain text (.txt) and processed using AntConc 4.0.3[13]. The analytical procedure was designed to integrate quantitative corpus methods with qualitative pragmatic interpretation within a cognitive–pragmatic framework[14]. In the first step, the Wordlist function in AntConc was employed to generate token frequencies, lexical density, and the most recurrent pronouns and verbs across the corpus. This quantitative layer enabled the identification of ostensive markers and inclusive deixis, thereby providing empirical grounding for the analysis of attentional management in RQ1. The second step applied the Concordance tool to examine the sequential and co-textual environments of pivotal lexical items such as *we*, *must*, and *peace*, which revealed how inferential cues were contextually mobilised to frame the speaker's moral stance, directly addressing RQ2.

The third step involved Collocation analysis using Mutual Information (MI) scores greater than 5.0 to identify statistically significant co-occurrence patterns. This measure exposed the underlying moral and empathic co-text structures, highlighting how affective and cognitive meanings coalesced within the discourse, thus responding to both RQ2 and RQ3. In the fourth step, Keyword Analysis based on log-likelihood (LL) comparison was performed against a reference corpus of UN General Assembly speeches (2023–2024). This comparative approach identified salient moral lexemes contributing to the construction of diplomatic legitimacy, further substantiating the findings of RQ2. Finally, the fifth step employed qualitative inferential coding, guided by Relevance Theory, to interpret how pragmatic meanings emerged through the interaction of empathy and inference. This interpretive phase provided the cognitive explanation for how empathic resonance reinforces relevance, thereby answering RQ3 and synthesising the corpus evidence within a coherent pragmatic framework.

3.4. Validity, Reflexivity, and Replicability

To ensure analytic reliability, concordance lines were cross-checked manually to avoid false collocates arising from syntactic adjacency. Interpretive coding followed Wilson and Sperber's inferential principles[15], maintaining coherence between empirical observation and cognitive

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[13] 'Laurence, A. (2025). AntConc (Version 4.0.3) Computer Software). Laurence Anthony's Website.'

[14] Arum Priadi, 'Unspoken Influence : Presupposition , Implicature , and Hypnotic Ambiguity in Indonesian Political Interviews', *Journal Fast In Humanities*, 1.1 (2025), 1–19.

[15] Lolita B. Makeeva, 'The Relevance Theory, Pragmatics and the Problem of Meaning', *Filosofskii Zhurnal*, 15.3 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.21146/2072-0726-2022-15-3-125-139>; Deirdre Wilson, 'RELEVANCE THEORY Deirdre', *Journal of Chemical Information and Modeling*, 2016, 1–25; Didier Maillat, 'On the Manifestness of Assumptions', *Pragmatics. Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)*, 33.3 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.21069.mai>.

inference. Reflexivity was maintained by documenting researcher bias in pragmatic interpretation. The entire corpus and AntConc settings are available upon request to ensure transparency and replicability.

4. Findings and Discussion

The corpus analysis of President Prabowo Subianto's UNGA 80 speech was conducted using AntConc to generate quantitative patterns that support the qualitative cognitive–pragmatic interpretation. Three primary corpus tools, Wordlist, Keyword, and Collocation were employed to capture salient linguistic patterns underlying the persuasive architecture of the speech. The data consisted of a verbatim transcription sourced from the official KOMPASTV YouTube channel (2025), comprising 1,784 tokens and 845 word types. The quantitative overview provides empirical grounding to identify the linguistic cues that index cognitive relevance and moral appeal within the speech's pragmatic design.

Table 1. Wordlist (Top 15 Frequent Words Excluding Function Words)

Rank	Word	Frequency	Normalised Freq (per 1,000)
1	people	42	23.5
2	world	31	17.4
3	we	30	16.8
4	peace	28	15.7
5	nation	26	14.6
6	together	23	12.9
7	justice	21	11.8
8	humanity	18	10.1
9	global	17	9.5
10	future	16	9.0
11	unity	15	8.4
12	war	14	7.9
13	freedom	13	7.3
14	cooperation	12	6.7
15	Indonesia	10	5.6

The Wordlist indicates a dominance of collective and moral nouns, such as people, peace, justice, humanity, unity, and freedom. These lexical items operate as ostensive markers signalling moral alignment and shared intentionality. From a cognitive–pragmatic perspective, their recurrence optimises relevance by anchoring the audience's attention on moral universals, thereby reducing interpretive effort and enhancing the accessibility of intended meaning. The linguistic repetition of inclusive pronouns (we, our) reinforces attentional synchrony and constructs a shared cognitive environment that facilitates inferential cooperation among global listeners.

Table 2. Keywords (Keyness Compared to UNGA 2019–2024 Speech Corpus)

Rank	Keyword	Keyness	Log-Likelihood	Interpretation
1	humanity	64.21	$p < 0.001$	moral empathy, universal appeal
2	justice	58.47	$p < 0.001$	fairness framing, moral reasoning
3	together	51.39	$p < 0.001$	inclusion, cooperative framing
4	peace	45.22	$p < 0.001$	pacifist ethos, global harmony
5	unity	39.84	$p < 0.001$	solidarity discourse
6	war	35.06	$p < 0.001$	conflict–resolution contrast
7	freedom	33.92	$p < 0.001$	autonomy framing
8	responsibility	30.51	$p < 0.001$	leadership accountability

The Keyword analysis highlights a statistically significant emphasis on moral and empathic lexis, distinguishing Prabowo's speech from preceding UNGA addresses by its Global South moral stance. Within the Cognitive Pragmatics framework, this lexical concentration functions as an ostensive strategy of moral positioning, establishing a relevance relation between linguistic input and moral cognition. The repetition of empathy-oriented lexemes (humanity, together, justice) invites inferential projection, encouraging the audience to derive implied moral commitments without overt assertion. Such guided inference exemplifies ostensive–inferential equilibrium, where persuasion is achieved through the audience's active participation in meaning construction.

Table 3. Collocations of "people", "peace", and "humanity" (MI Score ≥ 4.0)

Node Word	Collocate	MI	Semantic Relation
people	world	5.4	global inclusion
people	together	5.1	solidarity, empathy
peace	justice	6.0	moral legitimacy
peace	sustainable	5.7	pragmatic rationality
humanity	respect	5.6	ethical reciprocity
humanity	future	5.3	temporal moral projection

Collocational data further reveal that semantic clusters of morality and collectivity dominate Prabowo's linguistic patterning. High MI scores between peace–justice and humanity–respect substantiate the pragmatic coupling between ethical reasoning and emotional appeal. Within the Relevance–Theoretic frame, such coupling exemplifies how empathy interacts with inferential accessibility: emotionally charged collocates reduce the audience's processing effort, while maintaining high contextual impact. This mechanism illustrates how affective relevance operates in tandem with cognitive efficiency—an essential condition for sustained persuasion in international discourse[16].

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[16] Baiyu Wu and others, 'A Comparative Analysis on the International Discourse Power Evaluation of Global Climate Governance', *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 23.8 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-020-01180-4>; Nataliia Kravchenko and others, 'Commissive Modality of International Legal Discourse: An Implicit Mitigation of the Bindingness', *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12.6 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1206.03>; Beth A. Simmons and Robert Shaffer, 'Border Anxiety in International Discourse', *American Journal of Political Science*, 68.2 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12791>; Stephen Young, 'Contesting Subjects: International Legal Discourses on

From an inferential standpoint, the recurrent patterns across these tables illuminate how ostensive cues, guided inference, and empathic resonance collectively construct a persuasive cognitive environment[17]. The speech aligns with Relevance Theory's assumption that optimal relevance is achieved when the communicative stimulus yields the greatest contextual effect for minimal processing effort. Prabowo's discursive strategy thus demonstrates an economy of persuasion, achieved not through coercion, but through inferred moral cooperation—a process where understanding is both rational and affective.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that Prabowo's UNGA speech achieves persuasive coherence through an integrated system of linguistic and cognitive mechanisms. The corpus evidence confirms that lexical patterns of inclusion, morality, and empathy are not randomly distributed but systematically aligned with inferential and affective principles predicted by Relevance Theory. The interplay between quantitative salience and qualitative interpretation thus reveals persuasion as an emergent property of discourse cognition: attention is directed through ostensive framing, meaning is enriched through inferential coupling, and affective resonance is sustained through empathic extension. This synthesis underscores that moral legitimacy in political communication is not merely asserted but constructed through coordinated relevance across lexical, inferential, and emotional domains. The following section consolidates these insights, delineating the theoretical implications and pragmatic contributions of this study within the broader landscape of cognitive–pragmatic inquiry.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that persuasive discourse in international diplomacy operates as a cognitive architecture of distributed relevance, integrating attention, inference, and empathy into a unified mechanism of meaning negotiation. Corpus evidence derived from AntConc reveals the consistent recurrence of moral lexemes peace, justice, humanity, and together, whose high collocational density functions as linguistic scaffolding for inferential and affective alignment. These quantitative traces validate the theoretical claim that persuasion in global political discourse is cognitively anchored in shared moral accessibility rather than rhetorical intensity.

Theoretically, the study extends Relevance Theory by introducing empathy as an epistemic variable that modulates cognitive effort and contextual reward. This reconceptualisation reframes relevance not as a purely inferential principle but as an affective–inferential continuum, enabling mutual manifestness through emotional resonance. By mapping ostensive and inferential patterns against corpus data, the study provides a hybrid model of Cognitive–Empathic Pragmatics, expanding the explanatory power of Relevance Theory beyond dyadic communication toward collective cognition in institutional discourse.

Empirically, the findings reveal that moral legitimacy in the Global South's diplomatic rhetoric emerges through inferential cooperation, listeners participate in constructing meaning rather than receiving imposed assertions. Methodologically, the integration of qualitative pragmatic analysis and corpus linguistics demonstrates a productive path for examining persuasion across multimodal contexts. The AntConc-based lexical mapping substantiates how

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[17] Priska Breves, 'Biased by Being There: The Persuasive Impact of Spatial Presence on Cognitive Processing', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 119 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106723>; Kristina B. Hood and others, 'The Effect of Affective versus Cognitive Persuasive Messages on African American Women's Attitudes toward Condom Use', *Psychology and Health*, 36.6 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1080/08870446.2020.1776284>.

attention, inference, and empathy operate as measurable cognitive correlates within discourse, bridging interpretive and empirical traditions in linguistic pragmatics.

However, the study's interpretive scope is limited to a single speech event, which constrains the generalisability of its inferential model. Future research may employ comparative corpora across different national or ideological contexts to test the cross-cultural consistency of empathic relevance. Extending this framework to multilingual or crisis communication could further illuminate how global actors negotiate moral cognition through language. Ultimately, this study suggests that political persuasion is not an act of dominance but a cooperative alignment of minds, where understanding becomes the currency of moral power.

6. Acknowledgment

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